

BRIDE—MAYBE

Other Novels by Sheila Burns

HONEYMOON ISLAND

THE PASSIONATE ADVENTURE

ROMANCE OF JENNY WREN

WEEK-END BRIDE

WONDER TRIP

FUGITIVE LOVER

HOLD HARD MY HEART

BRIDE—MAYBE

BY

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We are so simple—you and I—
We do what others do,
Who live because they fear to die
And love the whole night through.

FLECKER

BRIDE—MAYBE

CHAPTER I

THE moment that he came into the room, Valére knew. She watched him before he had even seen her. Tall, lithe, walking with that languorous admirable grace. His head was sleek and dark, she had heard people allude to the hair as black patent leather, well, it looked rather like it. His eyes had a forbidding quality, yet could smile, they were dark too. It was queer that she had always admired dark men, when she herself had that brunette hair, and those hazel eyes, with the black lashes.

She knew that he would cross and speak to her. If nobody introduced them, he would have come just the same. Something told her. The dance band went on, and now suddenly she was glad that she had come here to-night, though when they had rung her up and had asked her to come, she had demurred. Tired, she had thought, sick of going about and showing off clothes. But Mollison had insisted. When you worked for a man like Mollison you did not hang back.

She had been very lucky to get the job, because she had never known another. Valére was twenty-four, born in Danzig within a stone's throw of the *Frauengasse* with the little terraced houses, and the petunias and gloxinias all blossoming.

She couldn't bear to think of it now, for Valére was of Jewish parents.

Never mind! The war had come, and she had been swept across Europe in the effort to escape. There had been moments, panicky terrible moments when she believed that she must

be taken, but she had got away and had eventually come to London. Mollison employed her.

"You are ideally suited for mannequin's work, you have the figure, you have the face. You will do well for me," he had said.

Now she was used to all that. To walking in those soft green carpeted rooms, languorously, luxuriantly, with his man-tailored evening frocks. Used to being dismissed to accept invitations for parties where she would show off his clothes. That was how she had come here to-night.

The frock was dead white. It was cut severely, close to her upraised breasts, coming in on the waist and slinky hips, falling in fullness below her knees. Around the neck line white violets were clustered. Masses of them. They stared out with deep yellow eyes, and their green stalks were the only touch of colour. She wore her hair sleek, upturned above the ears in those strange little drake's-tail-curly which were natural but which had started a fashion of her own. Not too much make-up, she never needed that, only a vivid mouth; her skin could hold its own.

In a moment he would speak to her; how did she know? Intuition. Presentiment. Second sight. She couldn't be sure, but he *would* speak, and she knew it.

She realised the moment that he first saw her, he looked again, then he came across to her, just as she had known he would, just as she had been quite sure, and her heart did funny tricky things, half choking her, tormenting her; she felt childish, like a young girl with her first *beau*, not knowing what to say.

"Ours, I think?" he said. "You remember me? Ivan Graham?"

"I remember you perfectly," she answered.

Not like a girl with her first *beau*! A sophisticated young woman calling his bluff.

"And your name is Violet?"

"A little wrong," she answered and smiled, "Valère."

"I knew that it began with a V."

She resisted the impulse to ask How did you know, and even why did you know. The band was playing a waltz, it was one of those bands that could play elusively; he had an arm round her, and they moved on to the shining yellow parquet. Only a moment before she had thought that the colour was crude; over-yellow, now she knew that nothing could make it too gold for her mood of the minute. She had realised that Ivan would dance well, but not like this. They moved to the music. The lights were lowered, they were changed to soft blue, gentle green, violet, and rosy pink. Tender lights, romantic lights to tinge their romance.

She had known that it would be a romance too.

"Like it?" he asked.

"I have always loved dancing."

"You don't dance like the usual English miss."

"I am not the usual English miss. My people were Polish."

"So?"

"And you, if I may say so, do not dance like the stereotyped English young man."

"No, my mother was a Spaniard."

"A Spaniard?"

"Yes, is it so odd?"

"No, no, of course not."

"She was a Spanish gipsy," he said, "my father was the country squire and lived up to the old tradition. It sent my grandmamma tottering into her grave. It turned my grandfather's whiskers white. But it made my hair a good colour, and it gave me something that I flatter myself the others hadn't got."

"And you're proud of it?"

"Wouldn't you be? Weren't you proud of your people? Warsaw?"

She shook her head. "Danzig," she said.

"The loveliest city in the whole world," he answered quickly, "but what are cities compared to lovely people?" and stooping he touched her hair with his lips.

"You are a fast worker?"

"Time does not stand still, one has to cheat it if we are to get anywhere," he answered.

She mustn't lose her heart; she kept telling herself that she must pull herself together, and not be silly. She had met dozens of men like this, casual strangers, flirtatious and amusing, ships that pass in the night. In her life all ships must pass in the night. She had got to remember that. It was madness to think that anything could be born of the emotion of the moment, a ridiculous madness, and she must put a brake upon her emotions.

"Now let's be sensible," she said as the lights went up.

"Why be sensible? There's no fun in it! I did not come here to be sensible."

"You're a very impulsive young man."

"So was my mother an impulsive young woman, that is how I came to be here."

They walked across the room to the little gilt chairs arranged against the wall; now that the lights were up again it gave a greater sense of reality. She kept telling herself that she must be sensible, it was no use losing her head over a young man like this. Ships that pass in the night, she reminded herself, ships that PASS.

"I'm going to see a lot of you," he said next. "I have an idea that you're the girl I've been looking for for years."

"I have an idea that I'm an ordinary working girl, and that you won't see so much of me."

"I shall never lose you. You don't realise that there is

that much of my mother in me. The wheels of her van make rut marks in my own life. Sounds poetical, but it is true."

"It sounds nonsensical to me."

He put out a hand and gripped her arm, so closely that it almost hurt. "You shan't say that. It isn't nonsensical, or ridiculous. There is something that the gipsies have that others never get. A raggle-taggle tune, the way they walk, their love of the earth and the trees, and the stars. I bet you've never looked at the stars."

"I bet you've never crawled across Europe with only their light to guide you," she snapped back.

He took in a deep breath. For a moment it seemed that he had halted, then he released her arm a little. He said, "There's a little balcony at the end of this room. Come there with me. I can show you the stars as they should be seen, in joy, not in woe."

She didn't mean to go with him; she kept telling herself that the ship must pass in the night, but for the moment they were hailing one another. She must not fall for him, she must keep a close rein upon herself, she must not let go.

He drew back a brocade curtain and she saw the hotel balcony, sweet with a Spring evening. There was the scent of lilacs from the trees just below it, mauve and white with the heady perfume that is surely the sweetest in the world? There were tubs of rhododendrons beside her, and Hyde Park beyond, with the yellow eyes of traffic nosing their way on the roads, and above it all the stars.

"Look, my sweet. My Valère!" he said.

She looked up and she saw that soft dark blue velvet with the tiny pin pricks that never stay still. For a moment she thought of those lost years, when she had laid waiting for that light in some fetid ditch, in some stagnant cellar, by the bank of a dark river, to crawl a few feet further towards

safety knowing that the star of David damned her. And then behind her there had been that twisted cross, the torturer's whip, the horrors of the concentration camp, all the awfulness that now seemed to be so far away. Gone. Finished with, and for ever. The sky was kind, and the stars were sweet.

"The lamps of Heaven light our path," he said, and he kissed her.

The ship had got to pass, and in the night. They could not stay too long hailing one another, there were reasons, and although she had tried to bury her secret deep and dark inside her, now it came out and stared her between the eyes. The ship **MUST** pass.

Yet she turned, and linked her arms about his neck; his mouth was warm and it asked for her. It was her one moment she told herself, the lingering rapture of a kiss that was hail and farewell.

He released her slowly. "That is only the beginning, Valère," he said.

"Please don't be foolish! We don't know one another."

"We don't need to know one another. I love you. I know that. I am going to love you a great deal more. I am going to love you for always."

"You're a very flirtatious young man."

"I know what I want when I see it. I will never release you. I will hold to you fast and for ever."

"No, Ivan, it isn't possible. Please be sensible. We have to-night, and no more."

"Then there shall be no dawn; to-night shall last for ever, for ever and ever amen."

"Silly!" she said lightly.

Perhaps that was the best way, to treat it all as something light and evasive and matterless. Perhaps for to-night it was better to forget.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"I have a tiny absurd little flat off Shepherd's Market; it is quite ridiculous, but it does me nicely."

"You don't work?"

"Yes, I do. I'm the head mannequin at Mollisons."

"So that is why you walk so beautifully. You move, you dance divinely too."

"I've been taught to make the most of myself," she said, and laughed. "Don't let's talk about it. Let's talk about you. Where were you born?"

"In Somerset, near Exmoor. It's grand country there. My people have owned the same acres for four hundred years. Sounds for ever, doesn't it? There are rowan trees wherever you look, and you can smell the scent of the sea. My grandfather brought me up. After my father married there was trouble you see."

"Trouble?"

He looked at her again. "My mother married him on impulse."

"Be careful you don't try to do the same thing," she warned him.

"My father painted. He adored it. He was painting in the garden and my mother came through the rose arch, going round to the back of the house to tell the maid servant's fortunes. She had her gipsy shawl, and when he saw her he wanted to paint her as she stood. The picture hangs at home now, in the little shooting cottage he had built at the far end of the estate. She must have been very lovely standing there in that arch with a topiary peacock above her, very lovely indeed."

"And they married?"

"Oh yes. A proper gipsy wedding, with fire and all the rest of it. The sort of wedding I'd want," his hands pressed her wrists.

"Don't be foolish, Ivan." For the ship **MUST** pass.

"They were married, and I was born in the big house. My grandfather tried to make a lady of her, and it wouldn't do. He shackled her and the gipsy cannot be shackled. I was three weeks old when she slipped out of the house and never returned again. She took with her the only things she had brought with her as dowry; her old red shawl, the gold ear-rings that had been her grandmothers, and the peddler's basket which she took from house to house."

"But where did she go?"

"Back to the tribe they thought; my father tried to follow her; he went to the tribe but they were silent as the grave; they would never have given her away. She had gone: she was just a memory, all he had got left was myself, and the picture of the girl in the topiary arch with the red shawl round her. That was all."

"But he must have found her?"

"No. He has never found her. He believed that one day she would return, he kept saying that she would, but she has never been back. He died in the war you know."

"What has happened to your grandfather?"

"Oh, the old boy keeps going, into the eighties but going strong. I think he will live for ever. Some of those old boys do. I have the shooting cottage and live there when I'm in the country. I've got a little place in Park Street, fairly handy for this. Bachelor's flat. You must come there?"

"No, Ivan."

"But we are going to see a lot of one another?"

"You're wrong. We are going to part when the dance ends."

"I don't believe it."

"You may not believe it, but all the same it is quite, quite true. Our lives lie apart. There is a reason."

"Mystery woman?"

She nodded. "If you like to put it that way—yes."

"I like to put it this way," he said and kissed her again.

She must be terribly weak because when he kissed her that way she couldn't restrain herself. She felt weak; she felt limp in those commanding arms of his, she wanted to feel his mouth, and to go on feeling his mouth. Everything else seemed to fail her.

"Please Ivan, don't make me love you, don't make me love you," she whispered.

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She slipped away.

The last tune had been played, the last chord struck. For one moment they lingered on the step of the big hotel, with the pallor of starshine in the sky, those stars, so unlike the ones that had lit her path across Europe, with the lilac scent and the first little wind of dawn stirring the laburnums, rippling over the park.

"Good night Ivan."

"I may see you home?"

"No. Another time."

But there would be no other time. The ship had to pass she kept telling herself.

"If you think I am leaving it here, you are wrong. I shall follow you even if it be to the world's end. Why I have only just found you, how could I lose you again?"

"Ivan dear, good night," and because she could not bear any more she slipped between the taxis, and before he could stay her, had turned into the maze of streets behind Park Lane. She must lose him. She went quickly, and finally; when she knew that he was not following her there came a little pain in her heart, almost as though she had wanted him to be there. But it couldn't be. Ivan was dangerous. She had

realised that the moment that her eyes had lit upon him across the dance room; Ivan was a firebrand. Anything could happen with him, and it must not happen, because already there had been too much in her life.

She walked now more slowly; the light was pallid but lovely, and London took on a new sweet beauty, the loveliness of dawn. She turned away from the fashionable street, where exquisite women lived, into a tiny one which ran from Shepherd's Market; her means had been limited. The flat she had taken was over a little patisserie, where the smell of hot pastries and breads came to her deliciously. The flat was tiny, but it was self-contained and that had been the thing she had wanted more than anything else. So much of her life had had to be shared with others; so much had been spent pursued and flying from others, only to find the way barred across the next corner. Now she wanted to have a door that she could close upon the world if she felt like it.

She opened it now.

The single room which was sitting-room and bed-room in one, was sprawling. It had a humpy floor for the house was old. A Regency window stretched almost to that floor, and curled gracefully to the ceiling. There was a slender iron balcony that had attracted her *from the beginning*, even though it was unsafe, and too small to admit of going on to it. But the fragile ironwork supported the deep green heart-shaped leaves of a vine, which stirred in the little wind of dawn.

The room was quite simple. She had wanted it to be so. Off-white, with the divan in the corner, in off-white too, and a quiet that was starry with little golden stars. For though the star of David had been the horror that had sent her before all Europe, the stars of Heaven had guided her here, and this was sanctuary! There was a polished round table with a bowl of flowers on it, pink-pearl rhododendron heads shimmering almost as though they were made of oyster shell. A mirror

reflected her as she entered, now a trifle incongruous in the white tailored evening frock.

She went over to the gas ring and put on the percolator to make some coffee; she'd feel better when she had had some coffee. That was of course what she needed. And a bath! The flat had belonged to an artist before she had come here, a wild young man with money to burn; he had transformed the big cupboard in the corner into a bathroom, the taps were shining silver against the white bath, the shower was pleasant, there were glazed oil-silk shower curtains.

She had a leisurely bath, drew on a wrapper and came back for her coffee. There would not be time to rest before she went on to the shop. She sat back.

She ought to forget Ivan, he could be no possible use to her. Obviously he was inconstant and strange, much of the gipsy mother was in his breast, and he probably had completely forgotten her by now. If only she could forget him too! She must. She must. Not only because he was fickle, but because also there was that other reason.

That reason! It throbbed inside her. Something that she could never forget.

Her mind went back to Danzig. How long ago? Some time the other side of that immense void 1939 to 1945. Eternity lay in those years, eternity, Hell, and stark horror. Danzig, that had been a city of cool alleys, of cobbled paths and of fresh lindens, veined with canals. Valère had stood on the old quays where the mills leant across the water, and the tall merchant's houses quiet, serene, stared down in dignity as though with the harvest of long labour.

The *Frauengasse* where she had lived, had been charming. Narrow and cobbled too, each house was approached by small steps leading to the terrace; there were gargoyles and leaden dragons which she had played with as a child. And when they had wearied her she had turned to the window

boxes where the flowers trailed, petunias, nasturtiums, geraniums.

Her father had been a wool merchant; they lived comfortably; her mother a fragile delicate Jewess was kind and tender. They had had six children, but Valére was the only one who had lived. They spoilt her perhaps, she was their darling. She had everything of the best. She thought of the Christmases spent there, of the little white ermine coat brought to her that Christmas morning.

"*Wesolych Slimmen*," the messenger had said.

She was only a child then, too little for so lovely a coat but she had adored it.

The Christmas that she had wanted ear-rings. Too young, her mother had said. But she had been wilful. She had slipped out in mid-December to the shop in the *Langgasse*, the jeweller's shop where Papa Hugovitch worked.

"I want my ears pierced," she had demanded.

Papa Hugovitch had said that it was ridiculous, and what would her mamma say? She could remember it now, with the snow against the window, and the cold coming in at the door, and she stamping her petulant little foot (she had known no better in those days) and insisting that he must do it.

"But it will hurt you," said Papa Hugovitch.

She had told him that she didn't care; she didn't care, she didn't care, if only he would do it. In the end he sat her on the counter, and he did it. It hurt horribly. She thought that she would scream but managed to stay herself in time. She dug her nails into her palms as he slipped in the little golden rings.

"You turn them round every day," he warned her, "and it hurts."

She said proudly, "Nonsense, nothing hurts me," but, oh how the ears throbbed!

She pulled her fur cap over her head and walked out into

the *Langgasse*; she wanted to cry but she wouldn't. Triumph welled up with weakness, she had accomplished something, she had done something clever. As she passed the *Marienkirche* she heard the children singing their Christmas hymns. She liked Christmas even though it was not one of her people's festivals; but it brought a pleasant air of content; people gave presents and accepted them, it was good.

She walked into the comfortable room at home. Mamma was making tea. Mamma would always infuse the tea herself from a little silver tea pot and kettle heated by a spirit stove. Mamma was funny about the way she liked her tea.

Anna, the personal maid, was fussing with home-made scones, and breads, and such. Anna was fond of fussing.

Valère walked in. "Look!" she said, and pulled off her fur cap shaking out her hair. "Now you will have to give me my ear-rings, for my ears are pierced ready for them."

A tiny spot of blood dripped down on to the white collar of her frock.

Mamma screamed! Anna said, "Oh, you bad girl, you will be the death of all of us. To go off like that and have so cruel a thing done."

Mamma was shocked, but Papa laughed. Papa thought it was brave of her, rather clever, and he laughed a lot. Papa was short and stocky with a little grey beard and kind eyes. He had several wrinkles, but they were pleasant wrinkles, and he had a way of thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets and strutting about with his stomach pushed out before him. He was very merry.

He bought her the earrings; far too fine for a child so everybody said, big emeralds with hoops of diamonds round them. She turned the gold rings in her ears daily, and how right had been Mr. Hugovitch, for it hurt a lot!

Never mind, she told herself. Nothing hurts me.

She loved Danzig, she loved her people. She loved the Mediaeval city, the gateways, the lower Vistula lapping the quays, the Renaissance houses, and the flowers. She loved the stirring of the lindens in summer, and the snow against the *Stockturm* in winter. She loved it all.

Then suddenly she was in her middle teens, old for her age, because jewesses mature early.

"Valére is going to be very beautiful," said the people.

"Valére always has been very beautiful to me," said her mother.

Her papa seemed to be changed; he was worried these days. There were rumours about the place, dreadful rumours, it seemed as though a streak of pain, suffering, and alarm ran through the country. Friends disappeared. It was the Germans, so everybody said, and it got worse. Valére pushed it out of her mind, for after all it was outside her pleasant life in Danzig; it would never come here. She was thinking of romance that would one day be hers, love and marriage, parties, balls, amusements. On the threshold of young womanhood so much was offered her.

Then she saw that her father seemed suddenly to have aged. Her mother looked drawn and pale. "Is Mamma ill?" she asked.

They took Mamma to a big doctor, and he said that she must have an operation. It was the first time that fear had crossed the threshold of the exquisite house in the *Frauen-gasse*. Now it came, a gaunt skeleton with the sound of bones like autumn leaves. For a moment it struck Valére that autumn was blowing in on Danzig; the yellowed linden leaves were falling, the dried twigs rattling together in the clicking music of castanets. She was afraid.

Papa said that Mamma would be a new woman after the operation, she would have only the best care and the tenderest attention. Mamma went to the hospital, she had a private

ward there, and nice nurses. Valère sat with her the night before the operation, and felt strange and cold, even though the evening was warm. Somewhere on the Lower Vistula a boatman was singing. The song seemed to be all wrong. It was cruel in its vigorous contrast to this scene, when her own heart hurt so much.

She ought to be cheering Mamma up, saying something kind and encouraging, but she herself was too young, and too afraid. The words would not come. She sat there in the little ward filled with flowers, her feet and hands seemed to go numb, and her tongue to become tied.

"You'll take care of Papa?" was all Mamma said.

"Yes, yes, of course, Mamma."

"Papa will be so lonely."

"Papa will be glad to see you back, Mamma."

"But if I don't come back. . . ."

"But Mamma, you will, you will."

"Whatever is, is best," said Mamma.

They kissed one another, and Valère walked home her feet lagging and she felt suddenly strangely old and rather ill; all her life had been sheltered away from pain and suffering, she was frightened of death. It is the stranger nobody who is young and vigorous wants to meet. But Mamma would not die, Mamma was not old, only forty-eight, and what is that?

When she got home Anna was making tea for Papa. "He has had no supper," said Anna slowly. Anna looked drawn too; her black hair streaked with grey was brought down on either side of a widening parting, her flaccid face fell in yellow pouches on either side of a sagging mouth; once her eyes had been beautiful, dark brown pools with a brilliant white surround. Her eyes had made men think of other charms. But now Anna was old and misshapen, her loveliness had fallen away, only her kind heart remained.

"I will go to Papa," said Valère.

She talked to Papa, but he was not chatty. He sat there in the red plush chair that had been his Mamma's before him; his small hands were folded on his little fat stomach. He looked very tired.

"Papa, you must get some sleep. Mamma will be all right. Of course Mamma will be all right?"

He said "Of course."

Much later when he got up to go to bed, he seemed bowed like a very old man. He patted Valère's shoulder.

"You're a good girl, Valère, a kind girl," and then "maybe she will be saved much if she never comes round again."

Valère did not know what he meant. He was worried and distressed, she realised that he did not know what he was saying. It was disturbing, but to-morrow when the strain was over of course things would be very much better.

They telephoned the hospital early; Mamma was very bright and brave they said, and not worried any more; she had had a good night, she had had something to make her sleep. They went round at midday; the doctor had said they could go then, they waited in the matron's room, and presently the doctor himself came to them. He asked to see Papa alone.

Then Valère knew.

She knew that she would never see Mamma again. She knew that something had gone wrong, and that Mamma had known that she would never come back. She would have to take care of Papa, she must keep her promise there and take care of Papa.

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She wondered why she should be thinking back this way with the strengthening light of dawn outside, illuminating the little flat, the little safe flat (oh, thank God, for safety!) in Shepherd's Market.

She had, last night, met a young man who had stirred her strangely; she had never been more deeply moved by anyone, not even by Leo.

She was remembering driving back home with Papa, going in and telling Anna; seeing Anna throw her apron over her head, and burst into passionate tears. Hearing the house rocked with mourning and wailing, watching the funeral go from it, feeling the emptiness, and the silence, never having realised that she could have missed anyone so much.

She had grown used to Mamma and Papa being always there, just as one got used to the little terrace, to the fine Renaissance windows, and the front door with the carving above it. Mamma and Papa were all part of her life, unchangeable, always there, now her confidence had been shaken!

Mamma had gone.

But she would take care of Papa. She kept telling herself that whatever happened she must stay faithful to that last admonition, and she must take care of Papa.

From that moment the disturbing emotions came closer and were more enveloping. Time suddenly stayed its hand. It was an immense vista of time, centuries crammed into a mere handful of tormenting years; yet looking back, it was only yesterday.

Until now she hadn't wanted to look back; she had tried to push the whole thing into the outer darkness of her life; she didn't want to admit any of it, it all hurt too much, far too much. But she was staring at it.

Mamma was buried in the cemetery. Mamma was no longer here, unbelievably different was the house, changed to a degree that Valère could never have imagined possible; Anna, who seemed to have aged, Papa, still Papa, but so different. Rumours. Hateful, detestable, terrible rumours.

Then the day that Mr. Hugovitch disappeared. Mr. Hugovitch good and kind, who had given her comfits as a child, and

boxes of delicious crystalised fruits. ("He will only make you sick, it is not truly kindness," Anna had always said.) Old Mr. Hugovitch who had never wished anybody ill was sent off to a concentration camp, because he was a Jew.

"Is it wicked to be a Jew?" she asked her Papa next day.

He said "Valére you must go away. You must go somewhere safe until all this has blown over."

"But this is safe. This is home."

He shook his head. "No, it is not safe. I might be the next to go."

"But Papa, you have done nothing."

He shook his head. "To be alive is sufficient. To be alive is to do something."

"But I cannot leave you. Mamma would not have wished me to leave you."

"Mamma did not see this coming."

"What is coming?" she asked.

"It is war!" said Papa.

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Just at first she didn't believe it; Papa had made plans for her. She had an aunt in Dubrovnik, he would like her to go to the kind Adriatic to stay; there of course she would be safe, or much safer, if only she could get to her aunt.

"I will not go," she said.

But she did go.

There was the night when she came home to a house gone quiet. As she opened the door she knew something had happened, knew it instinctively. Empty. Quite empty! Then aghast, as she searched for Papa, her heart making queer noises, and getting more terrified with every moment, she heard Anna crying.

"They came for him," said Anna. Her face was swollen

with weeping; great pads hung under the once beautiful eyes, her mouth sagged terribly. "They took him away to the camp. The concentration camp."

"I will go for him." She was very brave then. She would have faced the whole of the German armada.

"No. That would do no good. He told me to tell you. You must go to the Adriatic. Right away. Waste no time. Go. He said, try to get a British passport."

"British passport, but how could I?" She watched Anna with suspecting eyes.

"That was what he said."

"I will go to him."

"No. No you must not go to him. Go to Mr. Hugovitch's father, he will guide you."

She went to Papa Hugovitch.

Now the jeweller's shop was shuttered with black shutters and there was an evil mark showing that a Jew lived there. Valère was afraid of the mark. She was suddenly even afraid of herself, scared of everything. She tapped timidly, looking up and down to see if anyone saw her. Even the well-known street had become sinister and evil. A Jewish woman answered the door.

"What do you want?" she asked, but, seeing who it was, she let Valère inside.

Papa Hugovitch was sitting in a little back room. He looked very old and grey and he wore a black skull cap. Even his beard was no longer trimmed.

"I have come for help," she said. "They have taken Papa. How can I help him."

"You must go away," said Mr. Hugovitch. "You can help most by going right away."

"I cannot leave him."

"You must. You must leave him. It would only torment him even more terribly realising that you were here."

She said, "I shall die," and then when she had conquered her first violent fit of weeping, she told him about the British passport. What could she do? What did Papa mean?

Mr. Hugovitch told her. A British passport was a safe one, it would take her anywhere and unmolested. On that passport a new world could open before her, it was the ticket for freedom. Passports were being sold right and left in this topsyturvy world; it was a world gone mad. English men married women they would never see again to give them their lives.

"MARRY?" she repeated.

"So," said Papa Hugovitch.

"But I know no Englishman," she answered.

Papa Hugovitch talked to her kindly. Papa had entrusted this to him. He had money sewn in a tiny silk bag that she could take with her. She must start immediately, there was not a moment to lose. He had papers for her, not British ones, but good ones, that would see her far. She and Anna must go, and now. There was not a moment to spare, for something terrible had come to Danzig.

At first she refused, it was only natural to cling to the house where she had been born. She thought of Mamma's neglected grave in the cemetery, of the quiet background of home where she had always been so secure; of her friends here, the streets that she knew, the lower Vistula, the quays, the quiet friendliness of the whole place. But of course those were silly sentimental chains binding her only to the concentration camp. For in time they would all go. She could not help Papa by staying, and in that they were right.

She went home to Anna; they packed far into the night. They could take so few things, only the most precious. All the time Anna cried, and her flaccid face seemed to sink further all the time she wiped her eyes on the large capacious handkerchief that she kept in her apron pocket. But at dawn they were ready.

Valére felt dreadful; almost like a coward running away; she felt terrible as she sat in the train listening to the throb of the engine and knowing that it would be days before she could get to the Adriatic, maybe weeks. She would not look back. Anna strained her eyes for a last look at the country she adored. But for Valére the country was already dead.

They sat erect in the corner seats of the railway carriage, and it seemed to be for ever. There was a pain in Valére's neck, a stiffness that she believed would be with her for ever too; they ate sandwiches that had gone dry on them; at way-side stations they bought *brödchen* and *milche* but they were afraid to draw too much attention to themselves; they had not been able to leave the fear behind them in Danzig, the fear sat with them here, and it was a yellow star. When they got newspapers they saw what was happening. The war had come. The sidings were cluttered with troops singing victory songs, for a victory which they had not yet won. In the gruelling hot sun the train was shunted into a siding, and they sat there for six hours. Valére believed that they would never proceed again.

Anna became sick.

She languished in her seat for the journey had been far too much for her at her age. She looked terribly old and ill, and fell asleep muttering.

"The lady is ill," said the guard when they crossed at the Jugo-Slavian frontier.

Jugo-Slavia was safety!

"I will break my journey. Maybe there is a hospital here where she could have attention?" said Valére.

The Jugo-Slavians were helpful. It was with difficulty that Anna walked, supported between Valére and the guard, half dragged along the platform with her feet trailing after her. It was a lovely summer's evening with the scent of verbenas on the air, no sound of guns, no camps, nothing

horrible, yet the fear clinging to both of them like a garment they had put on and could not detach from themselves.

There was a small convent close to the station of the little town. The guard suggested it, and because Anna was so very sick, and hardly seemed to know what was happening, they went there.

A young novice answered the door, in her white novice's robes, with the glimpse of a cloister behind her. Directly she saw that someone was sick she opened the door wider. Inside there was peace. The Reverend Mother came forward, and helped. Other nuns took Anna away to the infirmary. For a moment Valère half dazed lingered in the little cloister, then the novice came to her.

"You are tired," said the novice; her eyes were kindly, and her hands tender.

They gave her some tea, and then she went with the Reverend Mother to Anna. Anna was lying in a small, very slender bed. Her unseeing eyes saw no one. But her face had grown more serene, there was peace about it, a peace that lately she had not known in life.

"What does the doctor say?" asked Valère.

"She will not suffer," said the Mother.

She did not suffer. With the dawn the brave spirit of Anna set forth upon its last great journey. The nuns did what they could for her; but there was so little that could be done. They could do far more for Valère. For a week they gave her shelter, security and courage. In their herb garden she lingered and found her new self. She prayed that news would come of her father; she prayed that she would be able to go on. She dare not look back.

When she left the convent Poland had fallen.

CHAPTER II

VALÉRE made her journey on to the Adriatic and now time that had once been such a major factor in her life, seemed to lose itself in one unending trail of event, terror, and stratagem. She could not believe that Poland had died; she could not believe that the Germans were in command. She trembled to think what would have happened to her father, but surely when she reached her aunt in Dubrovnik some news would be discovered.

As she sat in yet another train making the last stage of that terrible journey, she remembered the other people who had disappeared, swallowed up in the maelstrom of savagery suddenly let loose, and her heart sank for her father.

She felt as though somebody had hit her violently on the head and that she would not recover from it. She was stunned. Too much had happened. Her maiden life had been simple and sheltered, she had never been exposed even to the ordinary little troubles and anxieties that come to most girls, and this made it all the harder. She hoped that her aunt would be kind. Kerda Strong was her mother's sister, and much younger. She had done well, becoming a famous actress, and she had married a Slav. The families had always exchanged greetings on birthdays and festivals, little more, and Valére hoped that her aunt would want her.

Everything had happened with such bewildering suddenness; the change in the heart of Danzig, the agonies, and torment, the sudden shame and terror of her birth which might eventually rob her of her life. The star of David which

shone so fatally above her. Now, on the last stage of her journey when she ought to be nearing freedom, she was too dazed to think.

She came at evening to the little town.

The sea was bluer and clearer than around any other coast that she had ever seen. The pinkly grey cliffs had pine forests running right down to the water's edge in dark patches. The cypresses stood aloof, pointing blue fingers to God! She saw that it was a walled city of cobbled streets and thin alleyways, where tall slender houses rose, seeming almost to lean together as though in conversation. There were women in their full stuff skirts, and blue aprons, tied at the waist round embroidered blouses, but somehow she was not looking at the women. She got into the tired old car, and drove to her aunt's house. It stood beyond the town, walled round, with a long handle for the bell beside the gate of iron lac with stone supports. Beyond she could see the courtyard where salvias blew scarlet, and a fountain dripped almost mournfully; but there was an air of quiet, of forlornness, almost of forgetfulness.

A girl came into the courtyard, dressed like all the other peasants, with her full stuff skirt, fancy blouse, and the blue apron. Her feet were thrust into small slippers that made a tapping sound as though of wood against the pavement.

She came to the door.

"My aunt is expecting me?" said Valère slowly.

The girl looked at her, and spoke slowly. "Madame has gone away," she said.

"Gone away? But did she not get my letter?"

The girl shook her head. "Mr. Serena at the hotel will tell you about it. He knows," she said.

"At the hotel? But I was coming here to stay? My father is taken to the concentration camp; Anna, my maid, died on the way . . ." Valère had a terrible feeling that her voice was

becoming thin and faint, and that any moment she would not be able to continue, for the tears would choke her.

"Madame said that if anyone came, they must go to the hotel."

"Then she knew that I was coming?"

"No, no, Madame did not know." The girl seemed alarmed. "Madame married again."

"But . . ."

"Yes, yes," the girl was speaking fast, "but the master of the house died last Christmas. Madame thought it was wise to marry again. She has a British passport now."

A British passport!

Valère stood looking at her with the iron gateway between them, and the courtyard beyond in which the salvias blew in their scarlet profusion, and an olive tree leant against the wall, where the fountain wept. "I will go to the hotel," she said.

"Mr. Serena is nice," the girl ventured.

Valère got back into the old taxicab with the broken springs and the strange smell of camphor about the fustian fittings. The man who drove it had apparently expected something of the kind; for he gripped the wheel, and swung round a corner in a whirl of dust. Just below them about fifty donkeys were tied to stakes awaiting the return of their masters, then to go home for the evening. They smelt dreadfully. They had panniers and wore blue necklaces to keep away the evil one, and some of them had horrible sores on them. Valère, already feeling sick, turned away her head.

The little hotel stood level with the street; it might look unappetising from without, but within it was comfortable. The lounge had gaily-painted furniture in brilliant reds and blues, and there was a bowl of white camellias standing on the table. Mr. Serena himself came to speak to Valère, kindly, courteous, and middle-aged with the first faint frost of early autumn on his temples.

"You knew my aunt?" she said.

He listened to all that she told him, bowing from time to time very gallantly. Then he ordered the man to bring in the luggage and a woman to take it upstairs. "You," he said, "will come into my private room and have some coffee and some wine. You will feel better then, so much better."

"But where do I go?"

"You stay here for a time. War will not come here, yet," he assured her.

The little room was intimate and comfortable. It had about it an air of homeliness which was not of the lounge; at first Mr. Serena would not let her talk, but insisted that she must be fed. It was good food too, and as he had said she felt better for it. She was still disturbed, all her plans seemed to be going astray, but she did feel more sure of herself.

"Now, tell me about my aunt?" she said.

It seemed that the husband had died at Christmas as the maid had said. He had always been ailing, yet one of those people whom one never expected actually would die; his death had come as an immense shock, and at the same time there was the other shock, the knowledge that Europe was getting even more restless. Last autumn the Munich pact had satisfied some people, but now the Jews realised that the Germans were not going to be satisfied, for they wanted more, and would get more. Every hour brought the horror nearer.

"But here, in Dubrovnik, surely she was safe?" said Valère in dismay.

"No one is safe. She knew that. That was why she married again; so many women have done it; it is very wise."

"I can't understand it. My aunt was getting on, had she some old love, or why did she marry?"

"For a passport. Many women have married for less. She married an Englishman and she has gone to England."

"But she will never get there?"

Mr. Serena nodded gravely; "She will get there, the English can do much. She is English now."

"But she could hardly have known him," said Valère slowly.

"No, they met one week, they married the next; it was an arrangement." He paused a moment. "There are hundreds such arrangements now in Europe."

"But surely war has changed all that?"

"Not completely. There is safety behind that passport and they know it."

"But what do I do?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "For a time the war will not come here. Jugo-Slavia is safe, but only for a little while. The war will sweep Europe in the long run. It is bound to. For the moment you are safe here."

"But where do I stay?"

"There is a small room at the back of the hotel; it looks on to a courtyard. Patrons do not care for the ground floor and we are glad to let it; it is yours if you wish."

The relief was enormous; when she could speak again she said, "I have money. I got it sent on ahead of me to the bank here."

"You are sure that it has arrived?"

"But, of course. My father made plans only in June."

Mr. Serena shrugged his shoulders almost with indifference. "So much has happened; so much has miscarried," he said slowly.

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The room was tiny but her own. In the courtyard a plum-bago rioted in vigorous blue across the wall where a Madonna in bas-relief was carved. A wistaria drooped beside it. The courtyard was paved with uneven humps of stone, and there was a little seat in it with a motto carved upon it. Her fingers

traced the words. In the room there was a single bed covered in orchid taffeta, and a Cluny lace surround. It was all hers.

But ahead lay chaos. When she visited the bank they had never heard of her, and the money had not come through. She was here, practically penniless, with only the wad of notes that Anna had made her sew inside her belt for safety; with the emerald and diamond earrings that Papa had given her, the string of pearls, the diamond heart brooch, a gift from Mamma on her twenty-first birthday. No more.

She went in terror to Mr. Serena.

He seemed to be the one friend that she had, to whom she could turn in emergencies. He listened to the story and she had an idea that he had expected it. He said that she must obtain employment. As she knew nobody in Dubrovnik and as she was herself entirely unequipped for anything of the sort she did not know what to do, but Mr. Serena was a good friend.

That was the beginning of a time so fantastic that it was hardly believable. Dubrovnik, the walled city was a prison. From it there seemed to be no escape and during the next year the war came nearer and nearer. Valère stayed on as a governess to a family living at the hotel. The Countess Barski and her two children had flown before the European storm; for the first six months they waited hoping that it would never penetrate to this Adriatic coast. There was a good chance of it sweeping across Europe westwards. They prayed that this place might be forgotten. Poland had fallen, it fell quickly. It was next year when the low countries were going down before the foe, that Valère heard of her father, the news reaching her in a roundabout way, brought by a man who had escaped. Papa had died in the concentration camp.

She set her face doggedly in the face of misadventure. She went on with the dull days that ground out the best years of her life. She taught the children their lessons, and took

them for walks and drives. They would go often to Gravosa, with its lido beach. There the sea was very clear and lovely for paddling. It was jade and lapis lazuli in colour, a wonder spot. Under the oleanders men sold peaches and apricots, and it seemed that there could not be a war, amongst so much beauty. In the distance the mountains rose, and between them there were glimpses of fertile valleys. Surely the mountains would be a natural barricade? Surely, surely, she told herself.

But all the time in her heart, she knew. All the time this was just standing still and waiting for the terror that must come.

How long was it, she did not know. France had gone with the summer. The countries in the West had tottered. She wondered about England, but everybody said that England would stay firm. England would never be beaten.

Then came the turn of the tide, and the Nazi powers looked towards the Adriatic.

"You see," said Mr. Serena.

They had become great friends these two; in the warm evenings she would sit in his private sitting-room and talk to him. The business of the hotel was not as regular as once it had been, for people were getting afraid. She herself was afraid. She wondered about her aunt, but some friends had had word from Marseilles, in a long delayed letter saying that the aunt was en route for Wales. Wales sounded to be a tremendous way off.

"If one could get to Wales," said Mr. Serena.

One day, when the early autumn was with them, Valère saw the Englishman. He was standing against the coast line staring down into the clear sea beneath him, and then across to the islands which studded it. He was not too tall, stockily made, with fair hair brushed back and a soft brown skin. It was strange how brown Englishmen went with that fair

golden hair, almost like the Norwegians. In the summer Norwegians, Danes and Swedes had come to Danzig and she had always admired their colouring. This man wore a loose coat made of tweed, the sort of coat Englishmen wear so much, and baggy flannel trousers with no shape in them. That was how she had been so sure that he was an Englishman, by the very carelessness of his clothes, as though he did not care for them, nor how he looked in them.

She saw him about at different times, and always staring out to sea, as though he had nothing to do, and time hung heavily on his hands. She formed the idea that maybe he was a spy! About twenty-eight she supposed, with grey-blue eyes, and a pleasant face. One day she mentioned him to Mr. Serena.

"Oh, he's back, is he?" he asked.

"Who is he?"

"His name is Leo Thorne, he comes from the Midlands of England. He does nothing, goes nowhere. People do say that his family would have nothing to do with him. He was no good."

"But he must live?"

"He has a little money. He makes more in the casino. He goes from place to place living that way."

"But surely that is a bit difficult for him? Especially now."

Mr. Serena shrugged his shoulders. "He is always hard-up," he said as a matter of natural conjecture.

"Is he married?"

"No, no woman would marry him." That also was a natural conclusion at which to arrive.

"I see."

But she found that she thought about him a good deal. He did not strike her as being entirely a wastrel. She liked the way that he stood staring out to sea; she was, she knew, interested in him, and she had the idea that he had noticed

her with the children. One day he proved that to her. They met face to face on the road above the walled town. There were cypresses between them and the sea, and a ruined graveyard on the left where the Saracens had fought and had died. As they came face to face, he turned to her and grinned. Not unpleasantly. It was a welcoming, gay sort of a grin.

She thought about that too!

The first time that she spoke to him, she did so because she was surprised that he was there. She was sitting on a low wall staring out at the islands. The day was almost spent, and the war news had been dreadfully bad. She was thinking how far it was to Wales, and in Wales there was safety, and her aunt, and the chance to build up life again. Every hour brought the war nearer to this part of the world, for foiled in the West, Adolf Hitler was turning his attentions to the South. Then as she reviewed it in her mind, she heard his voice.

"Of what are you thinking?" he asked and she saw that Leo was standing there, the wind of evening blowing his fair hair back a little, his eyes teasing.

"I was thinking how much I would give to be in Wales."

"It always rains in Wales. Besides, you are not Welsh."

"I am a Pole."

"So I believe."

She said quickly, "You do not know what we Polish people have suffered! My father was put into a concentration camp, mercifully my mamma had died earlier. I escaped. He wanted me to escape and I got away, but my old servant died on the way, and when I got here my aunt, whom I came to stay with, had gone."

"She married an Englishman."

"Yes."

He grinned again. "Women do marry Englishmen these days. It makes things so much easier, and some Englishmen will do anything for money."

She coloured slightly. "Do you mean that my aunt paid him to marry her?"

"She certainly did. I know all about it."

"Oh." She did not know why she had gone cold all over. She sat there and her hand went up to the diamond and emerald earrings in her ears.

"A man would do much for jewels like yours," said Leo slowly.

She said "Oh" again, uncomfortably and half afraid. She wished that he had not spoken to her, yet about him there was a certain charm, maybe a sinister one, but for all that it held her.

He must have noticed her silence, for he murmured something about "getting along", and she watched him stroll down the road, his hands dug deeply into his trouser pockets, with the oleanders overhead, their cream blossoms flecked with pink, and some of their darker cerise flowers blown like rosy tears into the road-way. She did not see him again for a little time.

Things were getting bad in the country; suddenly it seemed that the maelstrom of the world was sweeping towards it, for there were troops on the frontier. The anti-Jewish menace was at their doors. Valère found herself staring critically at her own face in the mirror, afraid for the traits shown so clearly in it. Her hair was dark, it had natural waves in it, and clung lustrously about her head; her eyes were dark too with that velvet beauty which is so lovely a heritage of the Jewish community. They were dark-lashed against her pale little triangle of a face, and her mouth was sensitive, and again too red. She had never needed lipstick; even in those agonizing moments when she believed that everything was being taken from her, her lips had never paled, but that also is a racial trait.

It was marked there, the star of David for all the world to

see. There could be no escape, and if the enemy came nearer they would take her.

She did not know how long it went on! Suspense. Agony. A deeply-searing agony, the sort that one could not tear up. Then she met him again. It was after a storm, when the roads were wet and the oleanders washed. The cypresses looked like grim fingers pointing to something terrible ahead.

She came up the road without the children, the weather had been disturbing, and the news bad too; their mother had had hysterics when she read the papers, and she had nearly screamed the hotel down. Now she had had a sedative and was resting, whilst the nurse was left in charge of the children.

Valère had come out alone, and she was afraid. She wore a little dark frock, the earrings and pearls, and she was dreadfully cold even though it was a warm evening.

She heard his voice again. "Hello, am I forgiven?"

"There is nothing to forgive. Everything you said was true. The world has gone topsy-turvy, anybody can see that."

"I am going away," he told her.

"When?"

"Very soon now. Dubrovnik is going to be fought over. Oh, I grant you that it looks peaceful at the moment, very peaceful, but it cannot last! Nothing can last."

"What happens to us?" she said.

He looked at her. "This has been a cruel war for the Jewish people."

"Yes."

"Why did not you do what your aunt did?"

"How could I?"

"There is a steamer leaving next week for Marseilles."

"But it will never get there."

"I think it will. These little steamers put up a grand fight. If it does get there and then on and up into a Welsh port, it means safety."

A Welsh port. The words rang in her ears. A Welsh port, and suddenly it seemed that the mountains and valleys of that little distant country came vividly to her. They would be safe. Behind Wales a great power brooded with a sheltering wing, and the very name spelt reprieve.

"Would they . . . would they take me . . . ?" she asked humbly.

"They are taking only English women."

"And I am Polish." She made a little helpless gesture, her hands fluttering like bird wings against the loose stones of the wall that boundaried the road between them and the sea. For a moment he stood still, looking at her with a puzzled glance in those blue-grey eyes of his, then he said, "I could give you a British passport."

"How?"

"The same way as your aunt got one," and laughing, almost as though it were a joke. "I have always admired your earrings, you know."

Instinctively her hands went up to touch them; she had the same strange feeling that she had had years ago when she was almost a child and had gone into Papa Hugovitch's shop; the momentary feeling of triumph that now something would be done, the sudden halt as though afraid of coming pain, and after that resolution!

"You could give me a British passport," she said very slowly indeed.

"Listen Valère." Now he was sitting on the loose stones of the wall, with the cypress behind him forming an unreal background for his fairness, those blue-grey eyes, and tanned English skin. "I happen to be wanting money. I am not married. The price of your passport is your earrings and your pearls! For that I will see that you get a passage home in the tramp."

"Home? Wales?"

"Yes, to Wales. I will see that you get there, and I will demand no more in return." He put out a hand and touched her wrist. "I am not the marrying kind. Women do not appeal to me. You don't believe me? But it is true. I shall ask nothing of my wife, save to forget me."

It was that which had alarmed her! She had been going to insist that he would ask no return, now when he told her that he would want no return her whole heart changed. Surely he could not dismiss her as easily as if she were a paid servant. Surely there was more in it than this? Love?

"No," he said, "just a business agreement. A bargain. Your pearls and earrings, my passport and a passage in the ship."

"How do I know that you will keep your word?"

He laughed at that. "I am an Englishman. We Englishmen do keep our words, that is about the only thing that we do. Oh, I daresay you have heard what I am. Just a loafer. Serena doesn't care for me, but then who would? Serena thinks that I am fairly rotten, well, I am! But I do keep my word. Even he would grant me that. Look!" He took out of his pocket a silver cigarette case; it was patterned in a spotted diaper pattern and as he opened it, she saw inside it a small engraving which she read with difficulty.

Leo

from Mother, 1928

on leaving

The Old Chrisopherson.

and underneath it a badge, and the words *Floreat Etona*.

"Eton?" she asked.

He nodded.

She knew of Eton, of course, who doesn't? It is the Englishmen's hallmark. It is the thirty-carat quality. They sat side

by side on this rugged stone wall with the strange background of olive trees, cypresses, and oleanders, and the faint scent of musk which always came from the city, and the siren of a steamer out at sea for an accompaniment. The sky was lowering and ominous, she knew that there something dark was coming.

They were making the strangest bargain that ever two people made. He asked no return save the jewels, and he wanted no other return. He would protect that star of David that shone in her eyes, and he would get her a passage to Wales. Now, as they talked she knew that she had looked upon this period here merely as a passage of time, no more. It was ending. The trip home would be tormenting, but she would brave it. At the other end would be peace.

"They are bombing England," he said.

"But it is nothing to what is coming here," she answered, "there are no tortures there."

"No, no tortures."

Then, after a long long while, "When shall I see you again after the journey?"

"You won't."

"But where will you be?"

"Oh, my job is to loaf about here."

She said suddenly, "Are you a spy?"

And he in answer began to laugh. "What gave you that idea?"

"I don't know. I just thought it."

"Well, think again! I am trying to become a bridegroom, a very different proposition, isn't it?"

She laughed.

"May I fix it up? As soon as possible, I imagine? I can see the captain of the boat to-night, and I could get the papers in readiness in four days. Could you marry me then?"

She had thought all through her life of marriage, of the preparations, the trousseau, the thrill in the house, the marriage feast, the honeymoon, now this! Quite calmly sitting on a wall outside Dubrovnik, with the crystal clear sea below them and the maelstrom of Europe coming closer every hour. "Yes, I could," she said.

"Very well," he answered, "that is done."

CHAPTER III

MR. SERENA accepted it quite philosophically. He thought that she was contemplating a dangerous trip home, but that, if she accomplished it, she would be safe. He believed that the gallant little islands of Great Britain would stand. It should have been invaded before this, or not at all, and now he rather felt that it would be not at all.

In Wales she would undoubtedly find her aunt. At the little villa, Valère went again to make enquiries. She had not gone back there very often, for the maid did not seem to like questions and apparently resented the intrusion. It was in fact a couple of months since she had even rung the bell, now as she stood without the iron lace of a door set between the two stone portals, she thought how much it had changed. The bell made a dull sound as though it knew it could never be answered. Leaves blew about the courtyard, and the fountain had ceased to play mournful music. A great bough of blue plumbago had broken down and lay in a drift in the gutter. She rang again and again, but the house was deserted. She broke open the gate and went inside. The shutters were up. Where one had become unfastened, she peered within and now she saw that the room had been robbed.

Unused, it had been plundered of every valuable it had ever possessed; the chairs were overturned. Last time that Valère had passed by there had been neat dust-sheets over them all to keep out the dust, but now it was all left. A clock overturned lay face down on the parquet flooring, and a rude hand had plunged into its vitals, tearing out the springs. There was something ominous about the way that the clock

lay there, with its torn entrails and the wires protruding. It gave Valère the idea that, before long, Dubrovnik would lie in much the same way, and if she had had any qualms about what she was doing now they left her.

It was right to go, even the difficult way that she was going.

She turned out of her aunt's villa with a sickened heart. When she told Mr. Serena he just shrugged those huge shoulders of his, as though it were all part of the game of war; he knew that things like this were happening everywhere in Europe, and that the storm was gaining momentum, not losing it.

"Perhaps you are right to be getting away," he said.

There would not be room for all her luggage on board the tramp, Leo had told her. When it came to weeding out precious belongings it was difficult. Already they had been pruned down to almost nothing, and a couple of bags had been lost on that disastrous trip here with Anna. She went through her things again laboriously. She was sickly afraid, but she dare not admit it. She had got to make the effort, she had got to get to England, after that there would be time to have a break-down or get ill, or suffer any reaction, but until then she must keep a stiff upper lip. What was it that was engraved on Leo's case? *Floreat Etona*.

She did not see Leo for a whole twenty-four hours, and during that time worked herself into a panic that the plans had miscarried, that the whole idea had been a fantastic dream of no reality. A mirage in the dim desert of living, which could only make the actual living worse afterwards by contrast. Then Leo appeared at the little hotel; he walked into the lounge with the gaily painted furniture, his hands thrust into his pockets, his eyes laughing.

"All fixed," he said.

"All fixed?"

"I want to introduce you to the captain of the tramp. He's outside. Come and meet him. You may be in his custody for a long time and it is important that you should be friends."

"Very well."

They went outside into the balmy evening. The captain was sitting back in a taxi worn out two years ago. He was a middle-aged, squat little man with a grizzled beard; he had quickly moving eyes, and his uniform was very tired. His cap was greasy and dirty. She did not care for him.

"It is a pleasure to help the wife of Mr. Thorne," he said.

"She isn't my wife yet."

"She soon will be." The captain put out a big harsh hand, and gripped Valère's tightly.

"We shall make the journey," he said, "have no fears."

"I'm not afraid." But in her heart she knew that she was. She realised perhaps for the first time that the contract she was making with Leo gave him power over her. Power in a new way. It was all very well to make such a very personal contract in cold blood, but it was not the sort of contract that could be treated entirely in this way.

She was not in love with him. He was not in love with her, yet here they were contemplating and making sure of an alliance for which the only excuse could be love. They must be crazy. Or had the world gone crazy to permit such things, and even worse, to drive people into committing them.

They stayed talking to the captain, but he was in a hurry to be away, he had to see about stores for the ship; there would be a mere couple of dozen other passengers, by rights they only took a dozen, but you couldn't leave women to what was coming. He said it calmly, and shrugged his shoulders.

She would always remember that. You couldn't leave women to what was coming!

They watched the taxi crank and drive away; it made regurgitating sounds, startlingly clear in the still night. Somewhere on the horizon there was an explosion, far away, but the harbinger of those that would be nearer. Suddenly she knew that she hated the place and must get from it before it destroyed her.

"To-morrow morning we marry," he said.

"I know."

"How does the bride feel about it?"

"Very unbridal."

"That goes for the groom too." He hesitated a moment, and then touched her hand. "You've got small hands; pretty ones."

She wished that the sound of his voice did not suddenly start a pulse vibrating in her throat; she wished that she could control the silly feelings that came to her. After all, to-morrow they would be married, and however unbridal she might feel, there was about any wedding this extraordinary undercurrent that could not be stifled.

He must have realised her feelings. "You needn't worry," he said quickly, "I am going to ask nothing of you—ever. That was part of the contract."

"Yes."

Next morning she put on her white frock. She had pressed it the night before. It had been very hot with the scent of musk, dark red roses, of donkey hide hot in the day's sun, and of Adriatic city all blending together. She had pressed it laboriously with care, and early in the morning, the little maid, expectant and vivacious with the thought of a wedding, had brought in a bunch of stephanotis for her to wear.

"For your hair," she said shyly.

Valère took up the stephanotis, it had a delicate smell, she laid it against her dark hair and knew instantly that it

was too bridal and exquisite. This wedding was the travesty of a real marriage; none of it was true.

"Too beautiful," she said.

"A bride cannot be too beautiful," said the little maid very slowly.

Valère dressed in the simple white frock; the day was rising out of the sea, amber shot through with flame. In the distance there was the sound of explosions; ominous; a warning of what was to come! Once during the morning there was the throbbing of aircraft in the sky, and Valère knew that her heart missed a beat of apprehension. In the harbour she could see the tramp getting up steam; it would sail to-night at ten.

She met Leo at the Consulate. Mr. Serena took her with him, wearing the white frock with the stephanotis at the waist and a small white hat. She wished that she did not feel so strange, so utterly unreal about everything, so extraordinary. Her wedding day, the day that she had dreamed of for years, and had thought would be a culminating point in her life, now it was just like any other day and the only fact that it emphasized was that of escape. In the distance there was the sound of gun-fire; every now and then engines vibrated in the sky, foretaste of the future she hoped to avoid.

They walked down the street she and Mr. Serena. He seemed to be uncomfortable, putting an easing finger inside his collar, one of his best collars with stiff wings to it, and a silver and black tie tied in a piquant little bow. He had put on his smartest clothes for the occasion, for to him it was an occasion. They walked down the narrow street, cluttered with people just as on any other day, and into the consul's house. The consul's house was dilettante. He was one of those men who had grown tired in office; he saw crisis approaching, and was appalled at the catastrophe of Europe.

He met them in his room, a large room, washed pink, with a high ceiling, and windows reaching from ceiling to floor. The tin balcony had flowers on it, grown dusty by reason of the time of year; fading a little in the too-vigorous sunshine.

Valère saw Leo the moment she entered the room. He had put on a different suit, also in honour of the occasion. It was a pale beige suit, that once had been smart, but Leo was not the smart kind; he wore his clothes with superb indifference, he hung them on him as though they did not matter. He did not care how he looked. But in this room turned away from the sun, his golden hair shone warmly, his face looked more tanned than ever, his eyes were bluer.

. She had the feeling that he was a stranger, a man she hardly knew; she stared helplessly at him, and then he grinned, sheepishly, like a schoolboy, almost as though this was fun.

The consul hurried through the ceremony. There had been a number of such ceremonies, and he knew the reason behind it. He did not blame the women. War is cruel to them.

He gabbled it through, indicated where they signed, and the lines on which the respective witnesses signed, then he closed the book without even wishing them well. Leo and Valère passed out into the sunshine, she feeling awkward with the cheapest gold ring on her finger. She doubted if it was even real gold. Something that Leo had bought in a back street probably. She wished that it had been better quality!

"Well I suppose we ought to celebrate?" he said.

"There is a small private room ready for you at the hotel," said Mr. Serena.

Mr. Serena was trying to do his best. He liked Valère and wished her well. He led the way back to the hotel, and they found that he had transformed his own small sitting-room

into a bower of flowers. Here were plumbagos, oleanders and bougainvillea arranged in bowls.

"You will be happy here?" he said.

They sat down on either side of the table, with its big basket of fruit, the wine, and the cake that had been specially made for them. All fantastically unreal of course, because none of it could be true. The door shut.

"Well?" said Leo.

He was filling a glass with the wine, handed it to her, and lifted his own.

"We ought to have a toast," she said helplessly.

"To us, to love."

"To us," and she drank.

He said, "I have a confession to make to you Valère. Something awkward has happened. The ship will not sail until to-morrow morning. There has been the rumour of submarines outside, and they have been obliged to defer sailing."

"I can go on board to-night?"

"No. You are to stay here to-night; they are accepting no passengers for to-night. In the morning, yes. Not now," and he looked at her.

"What do we do, Leo?"

"For the sake of people's opinion, we ought to stay here. I assure you you will be quite safe."

"Yes, I am sure I shall be quite safe," but she said it uneasily. In her heart she wasn't happy.

He said, "Valère. There is nothing to be anxious about. A gentleman's word is his honour, especially the English. We do keep our word. You will be quite safe."

She nodded, she was uncomfortable not knowing what to say to him; she felt dreadfully uneasy. They ate their meal, they drank the wine, and it warmed her. She hadn't realised that she was so cold; she saw him looking at the earrings in

her ears. When she realised what he meant, she coloured, and unclipped them.

"Yours, I think?" she said.

"They are very beautiful. Where were they bought?"

"Papa got them for me in Warsaw, that Christmas when he went there on business. I was too young to have them really, and I went out and had my ears specially pierced for them. Mamma was quite angry with me."

"They are lovely stones."

"Papa was a judge."

She unclipped the pearls too, a double row of them graduated with an exquisite sheen on them, and clasped with an emerald and diamond clasp.

"These are yours too."

"Thank you." He thrust them loosely into the pocket of his suit; he did not seem to care, then he lit a cigarette. She felt piqued that he should accept payment so casually, yet she could not be piqued, for in return he had given her her life! The war was coming nearer all the time; the hour would be when it would come so close that the whole of little Dubrovnik would be swept up into the maelstrom of it. She could not bear to think of that.

"What part of England do you come from?" she asked.

"Are you interested?"

"Yes, of course I am interested. I want to get to England and to make it my home."

"I come from the Thames Valley."

"Is not that where your school was?"

"Yes. My people lived in Berkshire, near Henley. It is quite beautiful there. Not like this of course; very green and verdant, and lovely. The Thames is a fine river."

She thought of the lower Vistula and of Danzig again. She thought of the great rivers of the world, and smiled. "I love rivers," she said.

They spent the sultry afternoon driving out to the hills, and talking a little. But all the time she had the impression that there was a barricade about him; he told her very little. She wanted now to know so much about him, because her curiosity had been piqued, but she could not pierce his outer armour. They came back to the little hotel. Now it was growing late; there was the ominous silence that comes before the sun goes down and the night is born. In the sky there was the gleam of rose and saffron.

It was queer that suddenly Valère should feel different about Leo, in one sense a trifle afraid. There was nothing that she ought to fear from him for he had never suggested that she had any physical attraction for him. He had, she presumed, some obsession for collecting beautiful jewels; he had wanted her earrings and pearls, the first time they had ever met, it had been her emeralds that he had looked at, not herself.

The memory hurt. She knew that she would have liked to have held some attraction for him.

In the distance the explosions died down; every little while they stirred the distance like the inner grumbling of some giant volcano that cannot stay still, but murmurs before it gives vent to its final tremendous eruption. That would come; she knew now that the world was doomed to pass through a time of tribulation and of agony.

They sat on the balcony, and the sun had dropped quickly behind an olive tree so that the world became twilight almost in an instant, and the cypresses were no longer fingers pointing to high Heaven, but ominous and suspicious, like spies wrapped in dark cloaks, watching all the time.

They sat there with the night falling. He said presently, "I hope you did not think I planned this?"

"No, of course not."

"Would you prefer me to go away?"

"Whatever is most convenient for you?"

He looked at her whimsically as though it amused him. "I should prefer to stay. I will speak to Serena about it."

He went away; when he came back he walked with that loping movement; she had noticed the same easy movement in many Englishmen, about his mouth was that small smile.

"Arranged it?"

"There is only one room that we can have, this one."

"I see."

It was Mr. Serena's private sitting-room opening on to the balcony one side, and into an inner bedroom beyond. The door was open; she could see the beds, draped in Cluny lace, the fluttering of organdi frilled curtains at the window, and again there was that fluttering in her heart. Apprehension. Alarm.

"You need not be afraid," he said, "the sofa will do me very well," and he indicated it, one of the first Empire types of sofas, stiff, unyielding, not at all comfortable.

"It won't be very nice."

"I've slept in queerer spots. My life is like that."

"What do you do for a living?"

"Perhaps I do this sort of thing." He tapped the pocket where the pearls, and the diamond and emerald earrings were lying.

"But surely you have some occupation?"

He grinned at her again with that curiously school-boy face. "My father meant me to have one, but I was a failure. There is always one failure in our type of family, and I appear to be our particular one. After I'd finished at college my father gave me so much money to run away and play."

"Is that all you're doing?"

"Running away and playing? I suppose so. The money

ran out a long time ago, hence the need for this sort of thing." Again he tapped the pocket significantly.

"It was good of you to come to my rescue but I do hate to think that you did it only for gain."

"Perhaps I didn't."

"Well, what else was it?"

He paused a moment, then, with his eyes set on the distance, he said very slowly, "I was in Warsaw just before the war; I was doing some work there . . ."

"This sort of work?"

"No, nothing like it. I worked for Poland, and was sorry for it. I saw some terrible things there. You were very lucky to escape."

"But is that any reason for marrying me for some jewels?"

"Valère, please don't think this way about me. It was not only that. The war is coming near, women should get away, especially your race. The things that they have done to the Jewish people."

"But you are not Jewish?"

"No. I am an ordinary Englishman, but I think all Englishmen feel strongly about this. It was within my power to give you a chance to escape."

"Yes, I admire you for that; you have been very good to me. I don't know why you should be so kind to a stranger. But I cannot think why you . . ."

"Why I took those jewels? Shall I tell you something. I had to take them. I may never need them and if I do never need them they shall come back to you. Where shall I find you?"

"But it was a contract."

"On whose part?"

"We both decided that . . ."

"Where shall I find you, if I do not need them?"

"I am hoping to find my aunt. She landed in Swansea."

"It may be difficult to find her; what will you do if you have difficulty?"

"There must be societies I can go to. Anything would be better than staying here, waiting for . . . for . . ." almost as if in answer to her thoughts there came the distant boom of an explosion.

"Of course! Well, I will find you. There are societies to help people in England, there will be work for you to do. Are you prepared to work?"

She nodded. Anything to get away, to escape. She was terrified at the prospect of the journey before her, she had always feared sea voyages, and she knew that this one was going to be particularly difficult; she might never reach England. It was useless to sit here thinking of that. To-night was her wedding night; she and her groom were staring across the balcony to the dusk, they did not even hold hands. The stars had been born, soon the moon would come up.

He said, "You must get some sleep to-night; it will be dangerous at sea, and difficult; you will have to wear your lifesaving jacket most of the time, and they are uncomfortable things to sleep in."

"I shall be all right."

He did not press her again until much later. "You ought to rest."

"Very well." She walked across to the communicating door; "I am afraid that sofa won't be very comfortable."

"Don't worry about me."

She said "Good night," feeling strange, and went in to the room. She laid down on the bed as she was. She would then be ready for the voyage when they called her. She did not think that she would be able to sleep, never had she felt less like it, but she must have dozed off. She woke with a start. Leo was standing beside her. He stood there, his hand holding

hers, he made a little movement as though to entreat her not to be alarmed, and as she stirred back to wakefulness, she suddenly realised that there was the sound of aeroplane wings coming rapidly closer. A sudden explosion rent the air. Its vibration seemed to penetrate the very room; she could hear a building falling, the crash of stones and glass like a hail storm that seemed never to stop. The wings went away a little, there was another crash, not so vigorous, then receding sounds of an engine throbbing. She turned to Leo.

"They're going away," he said.

"What was it?"

"The sort of thing they do! Terror, they love to spread it, pain, devastation: that is just what they like best. The danger is past."

"Will they come back?" She wished that her voice did not sound so childishly afraid.

"I shouldn't think so, it is almost dawn and they are not so keen on the daylight. But that was the first of the trouble; they'll be back here, the place is going to suffer, you'll see. I'm glad you are going away."

"But you, Leo, what about you?"

"I shall not stay long."

"Why not come with me?" and she did not know why she asked it.

"I can't. Some other time. Not now."

He stood staring at her, and suddenly he stooped down and kissed her on the mouth. She hadn't expected it. She had not thought that his lips would be so fervent, his eyes, close to her own, say so much.

"Leo!"

"I am sorry. I oughtn't to have done that. I apologise, Valère."

She said nothing. She got up and went across the sitting-room and out on to the balcony. The dust was still rising

from a building that had fallen; there was the acrid smell of explosive, and on the horizon a dim burning red light glowing angrily. He came across and stood beside her; he said nothing. At this particular moment she would have given a lot to have heard him speak, for she felt herself drawn to him.

"Leo, you cannot stay here," she said.

"Don't worry about me. I have my own plans."

For the first time it struck her that there was very much more behind this; she turned and caught at the lapels of his coat. "Leo, I don't believe that you are a wastrel and some sort of a beachcomber, if that is what they call it. You are something more. I am sure that you are something more. Why don't you tell me the truth?"

He shook his head. "Because you are wrong. I am just a loiterer, there are hundreds like me. But even a loiterer does not loiter too long where there are air raids, and I hate danger. I shall be following you pretty soon, and with these . . ." He tapped his pocket again.

"Please don't think of them."

He said, "Supposing when you get to England, you want to marry some other fellow, how will you set to work to divorce me?"

"I hadn't thought of such a thing."

"I believe that at the end of seven years one may be presumed dead, but seven years is a long time."

"I don't want to presume you dead." He fascinated her, it was a fascination that for the moment she found inescapable; she knew that she was finding out little about him, she knew also that he did not intend to tell her more.

"You could divorce me for desertion, but that takes three years."

"You are not deserting me."

"I am not coming with you, and I could!"

She turned and clung to him; she had not realised that she felt so intensely about it. "Please Leo, come with me. I could bear that journey if you were with me, alone I am utterly afraid. Please come with me?"

He shook his head. "I can't," he said.

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They had a hurried meal of coffee and rolls; Mr. Serena was distracted with anxiety over the happenings of the night, and quite incapable of coping with anything else. He also believed that the enemy would be back, and was convinced that his hotel would be bombed. He hardly said good-bye. Leo carried Valère's bag down to the quay. The steamer was ready to sail; she was the last on board. Now with the over harsh brightness of the day she realised that she was terribly tired. She could hardly bear any more. The sleep she had taken had been fleeting; during the night she had passed through too much, and it was horrible to think of parting with Leo.

"I can't bear it," she said suddenly.

He still smiled.

"You'll be all right, you know. We'll meet again."

"You don't mean that; you are only saying it to cheer me up."

"I do mean it. We shall meet again."

That was the last thing that he said. They parted on the gangway, and it seemed that almost in a moment he had disappeared into the crowd. She saw the walled city with the mountains beyond, with the white fierce light on the stones, she saw the crowd at the quayside, but no longer could she see Leo.

She turned miserably on to the deck.

Within five minutes she was into that wretched life jacket

from which she was not to be parted again. She could not give details of the voyage, it was too long, and it hurt too much. There were moments when she almost came to wish that the ship would sink, and be over and done with. Moments when aeroplanes swooped down, and it seemed impossible that they could live. There were submarines too. She had always loved the sea until this moment; there had been days when she had gone over to Zoppot as a child, and had sunbathed there on the exquisite sands, with the gleam of white casinos behind her, and the oleanders in flower and the sea beyond, brilliantly blue and lovely. Now suddenly she found that the sea was a terrible thing, something that threatened and accused her, something from which she could not escape. There was the agony of standing by for the boats, wondering dimly if there would ever be the chance to get into them when the time came; and if they did get into them, whether an unscrupulous enemy would not shoot at them when powerless to help themselves on the open sea.

The captain was a kind old man; he had done the trip several times already and always without convoy. They would, he said, meet a convoy the other side of Gib., which would bring them up through the bay and home.

The thought of home sounded fantastic at that time, something quite outside her ken, something that she could not believe. There was a bad scare in the Gulf of Lyons, with a choppy sea running, and the women crying on board. But Valère did not cry; neither was she sick. She sat there staring out across the deck to the grey turbulent waves, wondering if it was intended that she should get through and meet her aunt again. Wondering if after an experience of this kind, when one felt so much older, so terribly much older, if one ever grew young again. No, she thought, one could never recapture the youth that had been before, that would have gone for ever.

Then when the scare died down, and the sound of shots was silenced, and the thin coast line of Africa rose to meet the point of Gib., with that faithful little British flag flying above it, they rounded the corner and came to their convoy. Dots of ships on the sea, and a trio of destroyers fussing round like motherly hens with their wings spread to keep their chickens safe.

They came eventlessly up the Bay and into the Channel. When first she saw the coast of England she could not believe it, the dullness after a world of jade and lapis, and all the brave bold colouring of Dubrovnik. They chugged into the Welsh harbour, with a sea that had changed from Mediterranean blue to Atlantic grey.

The brilliant colours to which she had been accustomed all her life, had faded. Now there was the shabbiness and the drabness of an England besieged, but a proud England determined to fight to the bitter end. She was safe.

She knew as she landed in that Welsh port that she had almost overcome suffering; she had never believed that anything could be quite so terrible as that journey with the hiccupping sound of the engines, with the smell of water and the ports clamped down so that about the ship there was the dreadful scent of death and fetidness and decay. The Irish stew they had daily, and the longing for fresh air, for safety, for shore.

Now she had them all.

After landing everything became blurred and indistinct so that she hardly knew what did happen, only that she never found her aunt. There seemed to be no record whatsoever of her arrival in England. At first Valère believed that it only meant going from office to office, continuing in the quest and eventually riding down all the obstacles and getting some news. But the news never came. She had believed that England, being such a small country, managed all this type

of thing well, and docketed dossiers about its people, but there was no sign of her aunt ever having arrived here. Later on she found so many like herself, whose relatives had disappeared in the maelstrom of Europe, and who had no hope left of reunion.

The need for work presented itself. That was difficult too. At first London was under war conditions and horrible nights had to be endured, nights that she could not have believed would be so cruel. Then the V. weapons came hurtling out of space, just after D-day when everybody believed that it was the end of bombing. You could never trust the Germans, she thought.

But it was during the flying bomb episode that she fell in with Mollinson. In a shelter. She had got a small secretarial job, of little importance but just sufficient to keep the wolf from the door. She did not care for it; writing had never entertained Valère, who even in Danzig had wondered at the girl clerks who went to and fro to offices and seemed to be content to spend their lives pushing pens across innumerable papers.

She heard the alert go, and went down to the basement of the small hotel where she lived. It was an uninspired hotel in the back of Bloomsbury, she had come there at the instigation of a bureau which dealt with such matters, and said that it was cheap, and that a lady could stay there. Meaning that of course, and she had known it as she nodded approval at the horse-faced superintendant of the bureau who had told her about it. Beggars cannot be choosers, she had to go there, not because she wanted to, but because it was the only accommodation that offered itself to her.

The shelter was good.

There had been an incident to hand at the bottom of the street and several people came in out of the street. Valère was sitting at the far end of the shelter trying to read a book.

She wore a silk *négligé* over her nightdress, the alert had happened rather suddenly and there had been no time to change. The *négligé* was a relic of better days, white with navy bands, startlingly attractive, and her name Valère embroidered on the pocket. It seemed extraordinary to realise that once there had been a time when everything of hers had been similarly embroidered and was in the most exquisite taste. The *négligé* seemed to stand out in the dimness of the shelter, which smelt of explosive from the street incident, and of humanity and of concrete powdering from blast.

That was the time that Mr. Mollinson came into the place; he had been walking down the street on his way home from, a night-club and the incident had sent him tettering. He was never a very brave person and it shocked him. Mr. Mollinson ran a dressmaking shop which was suffering rather badly from war casualty. When he came into the cellar he saw the girl in the navy and white *négligé*. He knew at once that it was expensive, he knew instantly that she had a lovely figure, and that she was good-looking. Mr. Mollinson, whose trade lay in such details, was unlikely to miss anything of that kind.

He went over and sat beside her.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

The fact that the book was a classic told him that she was well-educated, and that moment she spoke, he was attracted to her. Not physically; Mr. Mollinson was not the type of man who allows affairs of the heart to trespass on affairs of business. He was altogether a business man and meant to stay so.

"You understand clothes," he said, and he began talking to her. He talked about himself. If there was one thing that Mr. Mollinson liked more than another, it was to have the opportunity of talking about himself, and at this particular

moment when he was rather shattered, and definitely very anxious about the raid, it gave him stamina.

Another flying bomb chugged remorselessly over the city, cut out, and a few seconds after exploded with a crack. Mr. Mollinson screwed up his face, shook his head, and then went on with his story.

He had started his shop in one of the little streets off Bond Street, a tiny place but select, having it beautifully ordered, and showing only the most exclusive models. It had been sheer bad luck that the war should have come before he was actually on to his feet. Mr. Mollinson had always loved beautiful materials and had the hand of an artist. He could do things to fabric, he could produce line, he could make fat duchesses look like slim young girls, and duchesses, who were really like maypoles, develop a bust and insidious hips. He had that much art in him.

Unfortunately most of our duchesses were so plain, he said, and some of our countesses were rather dreadful. Mr. Mollinson dealt only with the best people, and he did them remarkably well. But his trouble was that he could not get beautiful mannequins. All the best ones had been called up. . . . It was quite useless to show a lovely frock on a girl who herself was not lovely. Duchesses put up their lorgnettes and liked to imagine themselves looking as the mannequin looked; Mr. Mollinson had learnt how people adore dealing with the impossible. He never disillusioned the woman who bought from him, because he was well versed in the gentle art of flattery and never missed the opportunity to add a little adulation to a purchase.

Women adored him; he didn't care so much for women. The strange thing was that listening to him Valère became interested. She realised that the man was a cad, that he probably had no scruples whatsoever, but that he liked the work; she had to admit that she admired him for his thoroughness.

He had been lucky in his manageress. Her name was Mitzi. Mitzi was a foreigner, but then foreigners gave the place a certain cachet. Mitzi wasn't pretty, Mitzi gave the customers assurance, she gave them the feeling that after all they didn't look so bad.

"You have to use method," said Mr. Mollinson, twinkling his furtive grey eyes. Then he came back to the point that he had in hand.

He liked the look of Valére. Had she a job? She had, she said, but not a very satisfactory one. Mr. Mollinson suggested that she came and had a look at the salon, he did not refer to it as a shop, that would have been too common. Just a salon. Nothing much at the moment for there had been a most unfortunate incident near it, there was Rosebay willow herb growing in Bond Street yes, actually, didn't she know?

The upshot of that was that Valére did go to see him at the salon, and had tea with him and with Mitzi. Mitzi was a queer little fat thing perched on perilously high heels, a French woman with a true French bust and eyes like black beads in her paper-white little face. There was something grotesque about Mitzi, yet attractive for all that.

Over the tea, far too strong, and far too little of it, partaken in a cubicle where a wedding dress was sparkling with paillettes and flung across a couch, the business proposition appeared. Mr. Mollinson had taken a fancy to Valére and wanted her to come and work in the business. He believed that the war was on its last lap and he wanted someone to show evening frocks. They would be coming back into their own the moment that peace was declared. War-jaded, tired England would return to finery and delight in wearing it.

Valére had an exquisite figure; she walked well and Mr. Mollinson had been very quick to notice it.

"But I was sitting down all the time in the shelter," she said.

"'E 'as the eye of zee 'awk," announced Mitzi wagging a roguish little finger with its too-brilliantly burnished nail. The nail was like a talon.

At first she could not make up her mind as to whether she would take the job that he offered her, even though it was far more congenial than where she was, and even though it promised great things in the future. For a little while she played with the idea, but Mr. Mollinson was most persistent about it, and although at first she had thought that perhaps he had had intentions, ultimately she found that she had been entirely wrong in that conjecture, and that all he wanted was a first-class model.

He engaged her.

Valère liked the work. The moment that peace came and things were easier, he launched out into a bigger salon. He had ideas, had Mr. Mollinson, in some ways a silly pettish little man but he certainly had ideas. He liked her to go about wearing her clothes and showing them at all the big parties and first nights. Valère attended race meetings, always as the model; she became rather a vogue. Women looked to see the sort of things that she wore. She liked the work, and nobody knew much about her only that she had come from Danzig. She told no one of Leo.

Time had toned down the horrors of earlier experience, the whole thing was fading like some fantastic nightmare gone with the night. Now she knew that she had almost forgotten the man who was her husband, and had even ceased to wonder what had become of him. Then one day suddenly, when she least expected it, she saw something in the papers.

It was an evening paper giving a description of a certain investiture at the Palace. There was a description of it, and a photograph of a man walking quietly out of the gates, with a boyish smile on his face and notice of the medal that had been awarded to him for service to his country. He had

it seemed been doing dangerous work of an undisclosed nature for England in Europe during the horrors of the second world war.

She looked at the paper a second time. Leo. Then he had not been a beachcomber after all.

CHAPTER IV

It was morning again, strangely reminiscent of that other brilliant dawn at Dubrovnik, the morning after her marriage.

Now it was too late to go to bed. She had been thinking so long into the past that she had forgotten time.

She got up, making herself a cup of coffee, and took off her frock laying it carefully aside; she would have a bath and then dress for the morning, she'd feel better then. She put on the neat tailormade of navy blue with the rusty orange blouse. All the time she was thinking of Ivan. Last night he had walked into her life, changing everything. Until now she had hardly thought of her marriage to Leo; not even when she had seen his picture in the papers to realise that he had never been a beachcomber. Her marriage, save for that one vivid night, had been in the background of her life, and she did not want to marry again. Now suddenly she did.

Or had she gone crazy?

Ivan had moved almost too quickly for sincerity she knew, probably she was foolish to think any more about him, but the affair had swept her along. She tried to convince herself that he had forgotten her with the morning, but she couldn't.

She finished her breakfast and went out into the cool fresh air. London was radiant with the early morning. Valère decided that she would walk to work, for as she had slept so little, the walk would do her good, and definitely freshen her for the morning. The streets were practically deserted, and the air blew coolly in her face. She turned into Bond Street, with its costly shops. Cartiers with the diamonds glistening in the window, emeralds as a centre piece reminding her of

the emeralds that she had lost, the lovely ones born of that happy Christmas in Danzig.

She turned down a side turning, through the ormolu doors into the salon marked "Mollinson". Everything was a lovely background for his frocks. The walls gleamed with a pearl paint that caught up any colour and reflected it mistily. A glass chandelier was the only ornament, and a very lovely one. The carpets were a tender shade of beige, and beyond the salon the dressing-rooms, the fitting-rooms and the show-rooms sprawled luxuriously.

Mitzi was standing there; absurd and astute as always, with a pert out-pointing bust, and hair scrupulously tidy; her eyes were a couple of little dark sloes in her pale face, and above them the hair was black and glossy, cut like a boy's, always in place.

"Zee morning after," said Mitzi carelessly; she was putting very dark nail varnish on to her nails, and she extended a fat hand to survey it with approval.

"I didn't sleep very well."

"I can see! I have zee eyes in my head," said Mitzi.

At first when she had come to the salon Valère had disliked her, thinking that she snapped. But Mitzi was not snapping really; all her caustic little remarks were meant in good part.

"It was a very good dance."

"I see that too. Who was the man?"

"You see too much," said Valère and went over to the dressing-rooms. To-day a duchess was bringing a lanky daughter to be fitted out for a trousseau. The daughter was Valère's build but had no poise. She was superstitious and would not try on her wedding garments believing that to do so brought bad luck. Valère was to parade in the wedding dress so that the duchess and her daughter could find fault with it! They *would* find fault; they were that type.

Mr. Mollinson would flutter about wondering what to do next with them. Occasionally difficult clients drove him frantic, and he would make any excuse to get away from them, but the trousseau order had been such a good one, that he did not want to escape really.

"They will be late," he said.

"Naturally."

Valère put on the wedding dress, with its glorious paillettes; it would gleam as the bride entered the church, a lovely shimmering creation catching every sparkle of sunlight and emphasising the tradition happy-is-the-bride-that-the-sun-shines-upon.

It fitted Valère beautifully. She set the tiara on her head, with the veil of pleated tulle falling in cascades Russian-fashion on either side. At the last moment Mr. Mollinson himself came rushing in with a long flower box of lilies.

"She wants to see it exactly as it will be in church, so you must carry these."

Valère herself a married woman, yet had never been a bride! That was strange. She thought of Leo now, and of Ivan as being even more remote. Perhaps she had been lucky if only to meet him for the one night, though the woman who married him would be luckier.

"Now," said Mr. Mollinson.

He was proud of the bridal clothes; the frock was one of his best creations, the two models following Valère (there would be eight at the actual wedding) were in tenderest rose du Barri, and they carried shaded carnations tied with blue velvet.

Valère stepped out into the salon, moving slowly, holding her head high. She liked giving so perfect a frock its parade. On the dais there was a little crowd of interested people clustering together, the duchess and her daughter, two or three women friends and relations, and a man. This should be a proud moment, thought Valère as she walked towards them.

Then suddenly, almost uncannily, she knew that something was wrong, feeling it before she actually saw it. She had the subconscious knowledge that something had happened and that *he* was here. Not Leo her husband, but Ivan. Last night she must have told him where she worked, they had talked so much, that it was difficult to remember everything that she had said. She turned her head and saw him watching her; the dark eyes were supercilious and amused, his arms were folded on the morning suit that he wore. For a moment she had the feeling that she was his bride approaching him, and she galvanised all her efforts not to look. Mr. Mollinson at the side of the duchess was elaborating on the clothes.

"It will look beautiful!" he said.

"It is superb," said the duchess. She had not thought that it would look so good. She had wanted something in slipper satin but Mr. Mollinson had talked her out of slipper satin into the frothy loveliness of chiffon and paillettes. Mr. Mollinson could visualise beauty, his difficulty was to make others see it as he did. He had had a particularly hard time with the duchess, who was well used to having her own way and quite prepared to fight for it.

Now he had his moment of triumph when she expressed her approval, but he realised that something was wrong with Valère. Usually he knew that he could rely on Valère. She was one of those models who did not plead temperament. To-day she was walking badly, she had come into the salon with complete assurance, now she faltered, and he saw her looking at the young man.

Mr. Mollinson had his own personal feelings about the young man. He had seen him walking across the street to the salon; well dressed (Mr. Mollinson was very quick to notice anything like that), exquisite poise, a well-born young man without a doubt. Mr. Mollinson wondered whether he wanted to buy a frock as a present for a lady friend; this

often happened, so that he was very well accustomed to the situation. He had gone on to the step, and there he had met Ivan coming in. Ivan had sang froid. He was completely calm, in fact it was almost as if Mr. Mollinson were the shy one. Before he knew quite what was happening, Ivan was there in the salon itself, and completely at home.

Now this!

It could not be, thought Mr. Mollinson, that Valère had some secret lover, for she had always been most scrupulous; he had understood that she was a married woman, maybe a widow, so many had lost their husbands in the war. Now he wondered if this expensive-looking young man (again he harped on the expensiveness of Ivan's appearance), was going to be her second, and if so, she would naturally give him a very good order for her trousseau. Mr. Mollinson had once before been very fortunate when the girl called Verena Stanhope had married a young earl, who had given her a complete Mollinson trousseau.

So he did not work himself into one of the usual furies which developed so simply in Mr. Mollinson's life, he smiled blandly, believing that nobody else even noticed what had occurred. Valère swept forward, past the dais, went the round of the salon and into the distance again, out to the dressing-rooms. The duchess was enchanted. Nothing could be very much amiss if the duchess was so pleased.

After she and her lanky daughter had gone back to their car, Mr. Mollinson spoke to Ivan, who was apparently waiting. He risked something.

"You await Valère?" he enquired.

"Yes," said Ivan, then quite coolly, "Have a cigarette?"

Mr. Mollinson arrived at conclusions by the brand of cigarette that his clients smoked; he accepted the offer. He dilated on Valère's personal charms, her excellent behaviour at work, and the diverting way in which she showed

off models. Ivan, though not too responsive, gave him the impression that he liked Valère, that he had met her only last night, but had been determined to see more of her.

"You are taking her to lunch?" suggested Mr. Mollinson.

It was not that he liked to lose a good mannequin (they were hard enough to come by in all conscience), but a mannequin who had married well, and who moved in select circles undoubtedly brought him other customers which was what he liked best. It would be a very unwise move to lose his temper, even though it was unusual for young men, even elegant young men, to hang round the salon like this.

Valère changed back into her own neat suit. Ships that pass in the night, she kept whispering to herself, and the night had gone, but the ship had not passed! How could she have been so indiscreet as to tell him that she was here? How furious Mr. Mollinson would be about it, if by now he wasn't in a towering rage, it would break soon enough. She went out into the salon. Ivan was still there. He came to her quite unhurried and unruffled, and she wished that she herself were not so terribly disturbed.

"We're lunching at the Ritz," he said, and linked his arm in hers.

She should have said no. The thing to do was to tell him about Leo at once, and cut him right out of her life, only instead she seemed to have become incoherent; they walked out into the street, and she had an absurd impression that Mr. Mollinson was standing there looking after her with that expression of tolerance which indicated that he scented a romance.

"Look here, this won't do," she said abruptly.

"You're quite wrong; it is doing beautifully."

"I told you no."

"I told you that I would follow you to the world's end. You don't think that I am put off as easily as all that, do you?"

"It was very wrong of you."

"Not at all. It was the most proper thing that I have ever done!"

They were crossing the busy street, with the green park before them, its thorn bushes abundant in May. The scent came from the hawthorn trees just as from any country field, and eddied up Piccadilly in waves. She could not argue. She tried to think, but perhaps she was bewildered by the lack of sleep; she did not know what worried her, because she was incapable of holding her own.

"You needn't try to get away from me," he was saying tenderly, "I have come into your life for keeps."

"But no one can do that."

"That's idiotic! I can do it. I told you last night that I should, and then you seem to be so very very surprised that I should insist on taking you out to lunch."

"It will have to be a very quick snack, otherwise Mr. Mollinson will be furious. I'm showing a coming-of-age gown this afternoon, and a presentation dress later."

"I'm not going to hurry my lunch for a pack of nonsense. No, my sweet. I have brought you out to talk to you. Do you realise that I have never gone to bed all night, but walked about Berkeley Square and the nightingales sang to me? Yes, I'm perfectly willing to swear!" and he laughed.

"Ivan, we are being ridiculous."

They had passed into the big doors of the Ritz. Ease. Luxury. Lovely flowers and a string band playing sweetly in the corner. The maître d'hôtel received them, ushering them into the comfortable dining-room with the exquisite view of the park beyond, where young couples sat under the May trees, with all the romance of spring-time in their eyes and on their lips. They had a reserved table in the window, for Ivan was the sort of man who would have seen to everything. Now Valère knew that she was tired; she would have

hated having to fight for a meal in a cheap café on a marble-topped table. It was comfortable here, the chairs were kind, the food luxurious, the cocktail already in her hand, put fresh strength into her. Yes, she was very very glad to be here!

"That's better," said Ivan, sensing her change of mood.

He was wise in that he did not worry her; he ordered food for her, all pleasant food, he ordered wine for her. He said little until she was fed and relaxed. Only when the coffee came, did he speak.

"You are not really angry with me, my sweet?"

"Ivan, this can't go on, there is a very special reason."

"What do you mean there is a very special reason?"

"It has got to stop; I can explain nothing, anyway the whole thing is too fantastic, truly it is. You must believe me when I say that we have got to be ships that pass in the night."

"You are determined to live up to your role of being a mystery woman?"

"Ivan, I can't go on like this."

"But I can, and I shall." He laughed a little. "You'd adore Exmoor you know, and I'm going to take you there one of these days; I'm going to take you down to the old house with the mullioned windows and the topiaried gardens. I will show you where my father fell in love with a gipsy maiden, and the room in which I was born. I will show you the room where my son will be born. My son, do you hear?" and he flicked her wrist lightly.

He was compelling!

She ought never to have consented to come out with him, because he could do things to her, he could wean her from right thinking; with him she was no longer her own mistress, she dallied this way and that.

"It isn't any good, Ivan," she said.

"That's all you know. Have some more coffee, it will keep you awake. Now what play shall we see to-night?"

"No play. That's definite, I have not the time. I'm tired out, and am going to bed early."

"Too bad. To-morrow night then? You'll be rested by to-morrow night."

"Listen, Ivan, when our lunch is over I am going to disappear out of your life."

"You said that last night. I told you that you wouldn't and you didn't. I am telling you now that if you think to disappear to-day in the same way, you are wrong. To-morrow I shall have caught up with you. I am finding out where you live, you know."

"That won't be so easy for you."

"You think not? I'm not finding it a particularly hard nut to crack at the moment. My spies are out."

"You truly must leave me alone."

"No, I shan't. You're terribly sweet, you know. Darling, what jewels do you like best? Emeralds? You'd look wonderful in emerald and diamond earrings."

"I had them once," she said very slowly.

"Had them? You mean you sold them?"

"Yes, in Dubrovnik."

"I hope you got a good price for them? From what I know of Dubrovnik, I can imagine any woman being done completely in the eye there."

"I got a very good price. My life."

"How dramatic!"

"It was more dramatic than you think." Then as she stubbed her cigarette in the glass tray, "When were you in Dubrovnik?"

"I've been there twice. I went with some school friends just before the war; we had rather a good time there, only I nearly got drowned. Went bathing where they warned me

not to, and diving in, came the most unholy konk! I should have died if one of my pals hadn't come in after me. A queer sort of a chap that, spoke all the lingos in the world, never would take on a decent job. Wonder what's become of him now?"

"The war disposed of too many," she said.

"Yes, of course. Leo was a very funny chap."

"Leo?" the pulse started vibrating in her throat, she was afraid that Ivan would see it working yet could not control it.

"Yes. Leo was his name. Queer, isn't it? I think he was the only Leo I've ever known. I always imagine that his old man got a bit fed-up with Master Leo, he was one of the ne'er-do-well kind, although I do owe my life to him, and of course that is a debt I can never repay."

"Of course."

"One day I hope to repay him. He was a darned good scout."

"You went to Eton?" she asked.

"Yes, we both did. Of course you wouldn't understand but it was a tie. He was serious in some ways. I'm not serious, I take my fun as I find it."

Which was just as she had imagined. Too good looking, too gay; he would never make a girl really happy. After a moment she looked at her watch. "I shall have to be getting back."

"We have made no plans ahead."

"No, there are to be no plans ahead," and getting up she pulled on her gloves.

He shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "As you like, but you only make me prove you wrong, you know."

"I wonder," she answered, "we'll see about that," and she walked out into the street beyond.

Ivan did not follow her. She looked back once from the door but he made no movement.

In one way she was grateful that he had not come too, then she resented it; the affair would not end here, she knew that! She had the impression that he could undermine her entire morale; in his hands she had a strange feeling of powerlessness, usually she was authoritative, but with him she could do little. Ivan was one of those men who went his own way, he did what he wished.

Out in the streets she found that the pavements were hot with the tedious heat of May, that had suddenly leapt up into a heat wave. There was the strong smell of tarmac, of petrol fumes, and lilies-of-the-valley being sold from a basket by the lame man at the corner of Bond Street. The scents mingled. She went back slowly, feeling frustrated in some ways, elated in others, and there sitting alone in the salon was Mr. Mollinson. He had always been rather a remarkable man, a man who took some understanding; generally he occupied a couple of hours or so over his lunch, and it was most unusual for him to be home so early, but to-day there he sat, poring over a big copy of Debrett. Mr. Mollinson's Bible was Debrett; he swore by it. He looked up all his customers in it, and—so the staff declared—charged them accordingly. If their names were not inside the precious covers of Debrett, then they were certainly not on Mr. Mollinson's books either.

He closed it with a bang.

"Well," he said, "I congratulate you."

"What?"

"I've found out all about him. Mr. Ivan Graham is third in succession for the Burystone peerage, that is unless his grandfather does something foolish, but he is seventy-seven, and won't. They own some of the wealthiest properties in England, and half of the West End. The ground rents must be enormous."

"But what is that to do with me?"

"His father married a woman with a most strange name and apparently nobody's daughter. Zilla."

"Yes, she was a gipsy."

Mr. Mollinson didn't like that so much; he was not the type of man who tolerates marrying beneath one, and he was disappointed in that marriage. "Ivan Graham is the only child. I think you have done very well."

"Please, it is nothing of the sort."

Mr. Mollinson's manner changed. It was almost worse when he became facetious and tolerant; he smiled blandly as though he understood an engaging secret. "Ah, we all know about it," he said, "nothing so sweet as young love of course, nothing so lovely. I won't say any more, but the firm make very good trousseaux, then of course you know that."

She went across to the dressing-rooms, feeling thoroughly vexed. The afternoon was tiring. She worked through developing a violent headache towards evening, and thankful when the last customer had been wafted 'outside.

"*Hein*, but what a day!" said Mitzi who felt the heat.

Valère knew that Mr. Mollinson wished to talk, but that she could not have borne it; "Not to-night," she told him, "I'm dead tired, and want to get home and lie down for a bit."

"But . . ."

"No buts to-night," she said and walked home.

In the early evening the area of Shepherd's Market was close and oppressive, and there was a feeling of general languor. Valère knew that her steps dragged and that she went slowly, but she could not help it. The patisserie was still doing brisk business, and from it there came that hot scent of pastry and cakes which was at times almost nauseating. Some chattering women delayed in the doorway, their shopping baskets

bulging. Mamma was just coming from the bakehouse with the Rhum Babas on a wire sieve. Valère felt that at this particular moment she could not stand Rhum Baba, she went off up her own stairs.

The flat was airy.

When she had first taken it she had thought that it might be stuffy by reason of the little narrow street and the scent of the patisserie which would forever linger in it. But somehow the flat was above such things. A little cool wind stirred the dark leaves of the vine on the gracious iron balcony, and the silk curtains moved in that wind, bringing an air into the room itself. It was pleasant.

The flowers she had done only yesterday were not drooping, but had come out in water; on the table was a wide bowl of syringa and dark red roses, country flowers with an essence that filled the room. She looked at the waxen whiteness of the syringa, which crowned the heads of the Saracens' brides, and is forever dedicated to weddings, and she sank back into the comfortable easy-chair, thankful to be home.

On the table by the fireplace filled by green beech leaves, a small registered parcel was lying. The woman who worked for her, must have taken it in for Valère, and she reached out to touch it. She did not recognize the writing, and for a moment it occurred to her that it might be from Ivan.

She opened it carefully, throwing aside the packing to disclose an ordinary little brown box. She opened it, and out of the layers of tissue paper, she drew a string of pearls and a pair of diamond and emerald earrings.

She stared at them with unbelieving eyes for they were her own. They were the pearls that had come from Danzig, and the earrings for which she had had her ears pierced that Christmas time when Mamma had been so angry with her about it.

She did not understand what had happened for them to

be here lying in her hands, lovely milky pearls, and the bright green sparkle of emeralds. It is true that Leo told her he would return them to her if he did not use them, but she had long ago given up any idea of that. She had made sure that the jewels had been lost in the general melting pot of Europe, and had never for a moment supposed that she would see them again.

Now she saw them brilliantly glistening in her hands; the same jewels that had been hers in those happy days in Danzig. Leo must have found out where she was.

She made a dive into the waste-paper basket for the wrapping, and saw the address carefully written. She turned to the tissue. In it she found a card, and on it was written in a small yet mannish writing:-

I did not use them; please accept them, they always looked so lovely on you.

Nothing more! He had given her her life and had paid back the price of that life. And again, as she sat here in the flat in Shepherd's Market, she remembered the man in that hotel at Dubrovnik with a world war raging through Europe, and the sound of distant explosions, and the knowledge that they were man and wife. Or not.

Leo. Ivan. Leo was a strong bulwark against whom she had leant, Leo was reliable. Ivan was probably a playboy, but he had immense attraction, and she did not know her own mind. For the first time the thought of a divorce came through her mind; instantly dismissed. For, unless Leo wanted it, she would not make the first move in that direction. But commonsense told her that he might want it. It was unthinkable that a young man like Leo could possibly stay unmarried for ever.

She wished she understood her own heart better, for it seemed as though she could never break faith with Leo. Now

she knew that she was falling in love with Ivan, and if she was to keep faith she must exclude him.

She turned the card over and over in her hand, looking for an address; there was none! Leo was another ship that had passed in the night. Slipping the earrings into her ears, she stared at her reflection in the mirror and saw the child of the *Frauengasse*, grown sophisticated, grown up, grown beautiful.

Emeralds would suit you, Ivan had said.

CHAPTER V

At first she tried to dismiss the whole occurrence telling herself that Ivan was only an affair, and that she could put him out of her life, but at the end of a week she knew that she had never for a moment appreciated his tenacity of purpose.

She met him again one evening, standing outside the patisserie, when she turned into Shepherd's Market at the end of the day. Apparently he knew where she lived and had been awaiting her there. Coming round the corner in the unexpected warmth of a sudden heat-wave, she had the feeling that she was limp and could fight against it no longer. After all it was crazy to be so anxious on his behalf.

He linked his arm possessively in hers, and smiled kindly; she liked the way that the corners of his mouth crinkled, and his eye had sudden twinkles. "You're dead beat, you need a cup of tea and a rest," he said.

"Yes. It's been a hard day and I'm glad to have got home again."

"I'll make the tea if you'll let me do it for you? I'm rather good at making tea!"

She had told herself that she would not admit him into this funny little flat, yet here she was almost mechanically fitting the key into the door, going up the narrow rather screwy little staircase, and into the room beyond, knowing that he followed her. Never had the room itself looked prettier; the windows were open on to the balcony; the vine looked coolly inviting, there was, about the place, that strong feeling of peace. She sat down limply in the chair. Ivan was on his knees beside the electric kettle.

"You'll see how domesticated I am. Why don't you slip into the bathroom, have a bath and change, whilst I get the tea ready? You'd feel a new girl."

"You wouldn't know where things were?"

"Yes, I would. After all most flats are alike. You leave it to me."

Because she was so tired that she simply could not argue, she went into the bathroom and had a bath; as she lay back luxuriously in the water with the strong refreshing scent of pine essence, she heard Ivan busy in the room beyond. He whistled a gay little French song as he got the tea things. She could hear him. The bath revived her, and she dressed slowly; when she emerged again, she had on the pale blue *charmeuse* that Mr. Mollinson had given her the time that they managed to intrigue a royal princess into a trousseau. Dead plain, finely cut, with one enormous emerald green tassel from the hip line, reaching almost to the ground.

She shook her hair out before the mirror which never got steamy owing to some strange film painted over it; she clipped the earrings into her ears and stood for a moment to look at herself, well satisfied with the result of the work. The earrings bore out the tassel with its rich full colour. Then she went into the sitting-room.

Ivan was still whistling softly to himself the same piquant little air, as he filled the tea-pot from the kettle. The tea was set on the off-white table beside the hearth, with the old-fashioned bowl of sweet-williams on it. Like scarlet eyes they looked at her, in their myriad cushions of flowers, reminding her of some print frock.

He drew in his breath quickly. "You look wonderful. Emerald is your colour and how few people ever dare mix it with pale blue. Yet the sea always does that. I remember at Porlock watching that vivid greenweed, and the blue summerish sea. You look divine."

He held the chair ready for her, and she sank down into it. "I feel worlds better already; the bath was a grand idea."

"You know you're working too hard."

"Mine is a hard job; people think it is light and easy, just walking about, but there is an awful lot of temperament in it. Mr. Mollinson gets terribly excited; one is always on edge. It's nice to relax."

"You ought to have a holiday."

"Well, it's Whit week-end."

He handed her her cup of tea, having poured it out meticulously, with the care of some old maid in a country village. "I've got an idea. Could you get Saturday off?"

"Possibly; there'll be nothing doing, that's obvious. Nobody ever comes to buy clothes on the morning of a Whit-Saturday."

"I'll take you down to Somerset?"

"But that's impossible."

"Certainly it is not. I have a car ready, and will drive you down myself. I want you to see Somerset, I want you to love it. You'll have to make the journey one of these days, so why not now?"

"Why shall I have to make the journey one of these days?"

"Because you and I are going to mean a lot to each other. You knew that when we met. You don't believe me, but I am going to make that come true."

It was like some delicious fairy story, and for the moment there came an unquenchable longing to cling to the momentary madness. She wanted to snatch the week-end and go down to his grandfather's place, even though she knew that he could never mean anything to her.

"You shan't say no to me," he told her.

She did not know why she retorted, "I'm not going to say no. I'm saying yes."

"Good! Shall we leave on Friday evening? Have your

bag packed, and I'll call for you at the Salon. We could have supper on the way."

"That would be fun."

He had lit a cigarette and his eyes were dancing. It was one of those thrilling friendships blown into her life with the rapidity of thistle-down, as gossamer, and as unenduring, and just as likely to be blown away again on the sudden impetus of any passing wind.

"You'll like Somerset. My grandfather is a dear old chap, and you'll like him too. What is more he will adore you."

"I don't see why. People are very prejudiced with regard to mannequins."

"I never think of you as being a mannequin."

"But that is what I am."

"To me you're the most heavenly person I have ever met."

"I should think you've met a good few heavenly people," and she laughed. Never for a moment did she pretend that he was not flirtatious and erratic! He was that sort, and she knew it.

"I've never been really in love before."

"Ivan, if I do come for the week-end you have got to realise one thing. This affair can never go any further. There is a reason."

"There is a much greater reason why it cannot stop where it is at the moment; that is because I love you so much." He perched himself on the arm of her chair and held up her face to his by putting a finger under the chin. Very slowly he kissed her. She had the feeling that the present was inescapable, that she was caught in a fast running current and could not avoid it. She tried to remember Dubrovnik and the night with the distant rumble of bombs, and guns, and crashing shells, and of Leo who had saved her by making it possible for her to come home in that dreadful little ship, through the most terrifying voyage of her whole life. And

Leo was not dead. Leo had saved Ivan's life, he had saved both their lives, and they owed him a mutual debt. Even as she thought of that debt, she tried deep inside her heart to argue that perhaps Leo would be glad to be rid of her, and free to marry somebody else. Perhaps it would be repaying his good turn with a similar one, and all the time she knew that she was cheating; she was trying to delude herself that this was what he would want her to do, when she knew it was what she herself wanted to do.

She had her arms round Ivan's neck; if only she could stay here in these arms, if only she could shut out the whole past and forget!

"You do love me, darling?" he whispered; she could see his eyes so close to her own, feel his mouth on her cheek, warm and demanding.

"Must I tell you, Ivan?"

"Perhaps I know? Perhaps I always knew. Then you talk about reasons why we cannot marry. There is no reason."

"But there is."

"Then let's forget it. Let's go away to Somersetshire on Friday evening, and forget it."

"Just for the one week-end. But remember on the Tuesday when I come back home the barrier will still be here."

"I'll risk that," he said and kissed her again.

They spent the evening, dining in a Serbian restaurant. The tables were of undraped wood, polished in a fine veneer with candles in pewter sconces. A single dark red rose floated in a pearl scallop shell. There was Serbian mixed grill, fruit and *Apfelstrudel*; coffee was served afterwards with glasses of Tokay.

There were interesting people in the little restaurant warm with the exotic beauty of a May night; stage folk came here from the theatre for supper, young girls with awakening loveliness, older men with poise. It was pleasant to be sitting

there looking about one, and unhurried. Ivan was amusing to talk to, an intelligent person, he seemed to be on nodding acquaintance with almost everyone. Valére was perhaps foolish to let the affair carry her along this way, but now she had got to the stage when she would rather have something to remember than nothing. For the moment she could not thrust him out of her life, and go on rigorously with her own routine. He meant too much to her. Yet every moment that he stayed, she knew that he became more inextricably involved with her own system of living and that he was learning more about her.

She talked laughingly of the old days in the *Frauengasse*, of Papa, and of Mamma, really it had been a very great mercy that poor Mamma had died when she had, for it would have been quite shocking had she lived.

Valére talked of poor old Anna in the little convent where the nuns had been so good to her, with their quiet hands, and their big white caps.

"Like cyclamen," she said, "they looked so like big cyclamen as they walked about, and it is curious that they all had such lovely skins. They were beautiful women, yet they never helped that beauty at all. I suppose they were beautiful by nature. Curious, wasn't it?"

"Perhaps a beautiful nature does make a woman lovely; perhaps that is why you are so perfect."

"I'm not a beautiful nature, Ivan; I have quite a frightful temper."

"So have I! I ought to have been well smacked as a child, but I wasn't. My nanny spoilt me. I have that gipsy abandon in me that throws itself into helpless furies. When I get angry I've got to be alone! Do you know what I do? I'll tell you though I have never told anyone else. There is a hill-top near us, and on the top there is a cairn, a scramble of stones roughly-made, rather a poor thing, one almost wonders why it hasn't

been blown away, but I go there. Up there I seem to be near to the sky, and the sky can help me."

"I know that feeling of wanting to be alone. I've had it so much."

"The longing to be alone is almost as intense as the longing to be with one particular person, isn't it?" he said. "Both hurt."

"They do," she said. There had been the longing to be with Leo, a longing born of fear when the world rocked; there had been the longing to be alone in that over-crowded little boat when she had never thought that they could reach Swansea. She understood.

"Once," he said, "well, perhaps I'd better tell you about it, you'll have to know some time, and the sooner the better, once there was another girl."

"I should have thought Ivan, there might have been a lot of other girls."

"Yes, of course there were, but nothing serious; this was rather different. Grandpapa's idea."

The waiter came up with more Tokay, he poured it out, and the maître d'hôtel paused in his round of the tables, mildly encouraging, appreciative of Ivan's kind words, a gentle little man with sad Serbian eyes mourning something that had gone forever with the passing greatness of Europe.

"Her name was Sylvia. She was the daughter of one of Grandpapa's old loves I found out later, what you call a very desirable *parti*. Poor Grandpapa, he had had trouble with my father marrying as he did. It's funny, but one's family, (who you would have thought would have your interest at heart, are like that) want you to marry the girl they like for you, they don't want you to love your wife."

"Your father was in love."

"Hopelessly. Almost fatally. What he did not see was

that he was mixing blood that will not mix. Oil and water. For a gentleman to marry a gipsy is much the same as to marry within the colour bar."

"Making yourself a half-cast?"

"Temperamentally, yes." He fingered the silver spoon of the small coffee cup, vividly pink china with a gold rim to it, exquisitely made. "There is a strong clashing colour combination inside me, and that was what Grandpapa must have known when he wanted to prevent my father's marriage. My mother was of course a wild contrast; she had no education, she was an untamed little creature and it was too late to hope to tame her. The artist in my father liked all that wildness, but in his own life it became quite horrifying, it must have done. Some of it is in me." He looked at her reproachfully. "I'm afraid I'll be a shocking husband, Valère."

"I'm not contemplating a husband."

He ignored that, and went on. "Grandfather saw after me very carefully; he chaperoned me into the Sylvia affair."

"The Sylvia affair?" The first faint stir of jealousy went through her. She had not thought that she would feel this way, but she did.

"She was a lovely creature, the English type, blonde, lily-ish, and rather frigid. I used to laugh about the whole thing, treat it as a bit of a joke, then suddenly I found that she wasn't treating it as a joke. She cared for me! I didn't believe it at first, just ignored it, but then I found that it was true. Women take these things more seriously than men do. Sylvia had been brought up to think of me in that particular way and she could not escape it. I felt rather sorry for the girl, and that was how it began."

"You were engaged?"

"Not actually, but something very near it, though never for a moment did I mean it to be that. It was all very difficult. I was sorry for the kid, having thought about it all her life,

and believing it to be something quite *fait accompli* when really it was nothing of the sort. She was pretty attractive in some ways, if you like them cold, reserved and distant; the two families tried fostering it. In the end I had to break away, and it must have seemed to be quite brutal. That was the time I disappeared abroad, for a while. Paris. Montmartre, and all that. I thought I would give Somersetshire time to cool down, for she lived a bit too close, you see."

Valère stirred her coffee thoughtfully. "Perhaps it would be as well if I did not come down this Whitsuntide."

"Nonsense, that's rubbish; you're scared that you'll meet her; well, you won't. Sylvia gave me up as a bad job a long time ago. She went off to America for a while."

"She hasn't returned?"

"Yes, six months ago, not that I've seen her, and not that Somersetshire has seen much of her either. She started on a reforming committee for the reshaping of Europe, here in London. She is tremendously keen about that sort of thing. Sylvia was always the sort of girl who had committee work at heart, she was a dear, she would do anything for you, but she would never have been the right wife for me."

"I see." But she couldn't be sure. If only this little vivid dart of jealousy did not prick her, if only she was not suspicious of the other woman in his life. Sylvia would be well born, one of those cold but beautiful Englishwomen who are rather like pearls; quite unapproachable.

The maître d'hôtel passing the little table glanced at the emptying Tokay glasses; he saw everything, that busy little man, and Valère had the feeling that his eyes could penetrate under the table and even see Ivan's hand touching hers.

"Very well. I will come to Somersetshire with you," she said, "it will be a week-end in Heaven."

"Darling, you shan't regret it. It will be Heaven for me,

too." He caught up her hand and kissed it. He did not care who saw.

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They were to start on the Friday evening.

On the Thursday Valère told Mr. Mollinson when she came to the salon in the morning.

"I shall be going away for the week-end."

Mitzi who was helping fold an evening frock of moonlight blue satin with a hem of vivid green sequins, glanced up shrewdly at Valère. Mitzi might look a funny old bundle these days, in fact there were many arguments as to Mitzi's age; she would never tell it; she hoped to pass for a well preserved forty, but rumour had it that she had lost a son in the first world war, though she would not admit it. Mitzi must be in the sixties. She had had things done to her face. There were moments when she went off for a week or so at a time, to have something done, professing that it was her teeth again. She must have lost more teeth than any sensible woman could ever possess. Mitzi's funny little face became more mask like, but more shrewd with time. The sloe-like eyes had perception. She knew a thing or two, that woman but she could hold her tongue.

"So?" said Mitzi, and then "it is 'im?"

"I'm going down to Somersetshire."

"Ivan?" asked Mr. Mollinson. He stood up and poised like an Ariel. He had some Ariel qualities, this funny busy-body of a little man, and he always encouraged his salon ladies to marry well, because by their aristocratic marriages he hoped to cash in on them in a big way. There had been the exciting time when Suzette Declare married that doddering old earl, who had one foot in the grave. Mr. Mollinson had been horrified that he might die before he could make an honest woman of Suzette, but the old earl, one foot in the grave as he

might be, was determined not to put the other foot in after it. Not he. He was still alive, and Suzette had long ago given him up as a bad job and had gone off with a dubious foreign gentleman. A good-looker?—Oh! yes, Mr. Mollinson would grant you that, but no bank balance whatsoever. It had been unfortunate that Suzette had ordered a complete trousseau of handsome garments for this her unofficial honeymoon, and that the trusting Mr. Mollinson had made them for her, only to find too late that her husband, the enraged old earl had denied her right to pledge his credit in the personal columns of the *Times* a month previously.

That escapade had been difficult to deal with, and Mitzi and Mr. Mollinson had grown enraged over it, but the thing had passed. And now Suzette had managed to get rid of her old earl and was married to a pleasant if plebeian stock broker who had plenty of money to foot the bill for her most engaging frocks.

"You will need special clothes," said Mr. Mollinson.

"I'm all right. I have got things of my own. I was not wanting anything from you," said Valère.

Mr. Mollinson was in a generous mood. "But certainly, I do not like my girls to go out and about without wearing the best and only the best; what have you for the country?"

The little pin-stripe suit that she had bought cheaply in Oxford Street one afternoon; a couple of white blouses, (there was something habitually fresh about a white blouse) the camel coat, an evening frock, a silk day-frock.

"Pooh!" said Mr. Mollinson contemptuously. "No line, no *cachet*. No charm."

He insisted that Valère took with her the light grey suit, with the scarlet and grey hat and gloves to go with it.

"It is a present," he said graciously, "you must change into them before you go."

"Surely they are a bit over smart for Somerset?"

"Nonsense, they look right." He glanced approvingly at the neat white shoes that she wore with the suit and the small white bag. "I shall expect much from you Valère. You are not the sort that forgets old friends, are you?"

She said that she was not.

On the Friday Mitzi waved her good-bye. "Men, zey are all zee same," said Mitzi contemptuously, "I do not like zem. Be careful; you would be wise to be careful."

Ivan was waiting for Valère in the little street, in the large cream two-seater, with its bulging sides, and the polish on it that shone like a jewel in the little side street. The patisserie was doing good business, rushing things with the holiday coming on. Valère waved to Ivan and went upstairs for her case. The flat was cool; it seemed a pity to have to close the windows on the balcony where the vine blew, but if there were thunder she might find the place flooded on her return if she did not do something. She shut and locked it.

She picked up her case, conscious of the smartness of her clothes, and knowing that she stood on the threshold of a great adventure. Her heart fluttered as she glanced round her for a moment realising that anything might happen before she got back again. She was going to snatch this week-end only, she was going to keep it for the future, and let what went before and what came after, mean nothing to her.

ONE WEEK-END!

She ran down the stairs again, waving to the little fat woman in the patisserie as she passed. The little fat woman was tired with serving *croisettes* and *brioche*; on such occasions everything was bought up. She wished that she were a girl again and could run off in a fine car with a gentleman who looked like a cinema hero. *Gentil* she told herself. For Pierre, whom she had married in a crazy moment in Rheims, had never been *gentil*, too short, too fat, and with eyes that she had tried to flatter herself were like black pansies, and which

were really like two little black currants; pig-eyes she had called them later when she had been so bitterly disillusioned.

Ivan had lustrous dark eyes, like those of the young man gipsy who had told her fortune at the time of St. Catherine's fair, and had warned her that she would marry a man who was a *tigre* in temperament. Pierre had never been a *tigre*. Just a fool! Is there anything more disillusioning than to marry a fool, forever in the taverns whilst his wife sells at the patisserie enabling him to get more money to spend yet again on more wine.

"Pst," she said to herself, as she watched Valère and Ivan drive away.

Just a May madness, well, it comes to all the young, but it leaves the old severely alone. Perhaps that is the immense tragedy of age.

They turned the car out of London heading west. At first there were the crowds, then they came down Chiswick Mall, out towards Kew, with the first breath of cooler air, and the first glimpses of trees. The road which ran westwards, with the glimpse of Windsor castle on the left, with the open fields beyond, and the sweet smell of verdure, and of country. The heat was abating, for they had got away from the smell of petrol and hot roadways and humanity, tired and worn, jostling one another in the crazy attempts to get out and away to the country.

"I brought a picnic basket, I thought we could sup by the roadside?" said Ivan.

"What a lovely idea."

"Well, every little pub will be crowded out, every hotel full, I thought the fields were almost nicer. We shan't have time to get to the Quantocks of course, but almost."

"The Quantocks?"

"The hills of home," he said, and when he spoke his words sounded reverent, almost as though he was in church.

They backed the car into a grassy lane for supper. A May tree was still in flower, smelling like country wine, strong and heady. The whole place was vivid with bird song, and vivacious. The cow-parsley was a lace quilt tossed carelessly over the greenery, there were buttercups in the fields beyond, brassy gold, almost unbelievable and the dog-roses were in bud. They got out of the car to stretch their limbs, and Ivan brought the cushions out so that they sat by the side against a fallen tree, and he produced the food. Cold chicken and salad, a bottle of wine, gooseberry pie and a little carton of cream.

"It all looks lovely."

"I flatter myself that I can choose the right meal," he said and laughed.

"You can, quite obviously."

He displayed the food and they started to eat. The birds, dismayed for the moment now hopped closer peering at them with beady enquiring eyes.

"You're not frightened of coming down to my home, Valère?"

"Only afraid that you may have talked too glowingly of me to your grandfather."

"I have said nothing to him. He is the most understanding person and will be enchanted with you."

"You say that because you are enchanted yourself, but only pro tem."

"I refuse to be drawn to that bait." He held up a glass. "To our happiness, to a thousand such meals together. To our whole future."

She drank. After all if she was playing this ridiculous game of make-believe she might as well play it effectively, and wake up again as she must do next Tuesday.

"I think I am a bit scared, Ivan."

"Grandpa won't bite you; he'll adore you."

"What does he know about us?"

"Nothing at all, I thought I would let him judge for himself. Too many young men make the mistake of extolling the girl to the eyes, instead of leaving it to the in-laws to form their own opinion. It could never be unfavourable of you, you see."

"I only hope you're right."

"I am right, I know I'm right."

"Is he very old?"

"To me he has always seemed to be very young. He is in the seventies of course, but alert with it. I believe that you'll like him, I do hope so."

"I'll like him," she said.

A nightingale began to sing in a thorn bush across the lane, which led to a tiny coppice.

"Do you hear that?" he asked.

She listened for a moment. "I never thought that anything could be so beautiful."

"It is the world's most enchanting love song."

She felt her hand creep along the grass and take his. Hand-in-hand they sat listening spell bound. It was more exquisite than the *Serenata* at Venice, than the grand opera in Milan, or Moscow, it was nature's own *serenata*, and for them.

"I'm glad we came here," she said at last when the nightingale had flittered away.

"I'm glad that the nightingale sang for us. There is enough of my mother in me to demand the nightingale's song for a *serenade*."

"I'm terribly happy," she said softly.

"I'm terribly happy too." They did not need words. They just sat holding hands so closely, that it seemed that they were one person. She felt his mouth on her throat, his face nuzzling against her own, in a little-boyish movement of content. She wished that the moment could last for ever, the smell of the country lane with the bruised verdure, the

wind sighing in the trees, and the intermittent song of the nightingale. But at last he got up.

"If we are ever to get home, we have got to break the spell."

"Ivan, I shall always remember this. It was as if the world stood still for us."

"It did stand still. It was our world to command for the time being, we were king and queen of it, but there will be hundreds more such moments."

"Never Ivan, never a moment so beautiful as this."

He kissed her lightly on the tip of the nose as he passed her, his arms full of cushions and the picnic basket. "That is only because you don't know; only because you don't realise that I am going to build a new world for you, a marvellous world where only happiness is allowed. You'll see."

"I will see."

They got into the car again. Now it was much cooler, lovelier still, yet she felt sad at leaving the little lane with the greenery and the bird song, and the first of the stars pricking through the sky behind the tall trees. Ivan speeded up. They came to the Quantocks and to lovely Somersetshire, with its white-washed cottages, and kindly shaggy roofs; they speeded through small villages nestled lovingly at the foot of rounded hills, and on to the wildness of Exmoor, with the rowans in flower, the ponies and the long lush grasses.

"There," he called exultingly pointing to a large house sprawled carelessly in a valley. "That's it!"

"That?"

"Don't say 'that' in such an indifferent way? Don't you like it? It's home."

She looked again through the amethyst shadows of the dusk and she saw the big old white house, with a battlemented tower, from which a scarlet flag flapped limply against the mast. She saw big old trees clustering round it as though to afford it shelter. "It looks very beautiful," she said.

They dropped down the hillside, and here the trees arched the road so that it seemed as though one passed through a green cloister. There were the scattered houses of the village, a small green with a drinking trough at one end, a wide pool rimmed with willows and some white houses standing back beyond.

"Sylvia's," said Ivan as they passed the biggest of the houses, one with frequent windows, and a high wall standing before it as though to shut out the inquisitive.

The car turned in at the lodge gates; it was a tiny lodge with pink geraniums brimming from wooden window boxes, and a little old woman who stood to hold the gate wide for them. The avenue was shortish, of chestnuts in pink and white flower, and a bridge across the shimmer of a lake. Romance had passed this gateway before, it had entered when a gipsy came to tell the maid's fortunes, and to lose her own heart to the son of the house; it entered now, though their romance she knew could not endure. Leo, she kept telling herself, she must not forget Leo and her hand went instinctively to the emerald earrings. Where had those earrings been during the time between, she wondered?

The car came to a halt before the portico, old and squarish. Instantly the door opened and the butler came out. Valère saw at once that he was bent, and very old, he would probably die here and on duty she told herself.

"Mr. Ivan? His lordship is in the library," said the butler.

"Hello, Biggs." Ivan had him by the hand and was shaking it violently. "Good show seeing you again after all this time! Very, very good show."

"Good evening, miss." Old Biggs had his hand on her suit case and they went up the shallow steps together and into the house.

The great hall was darkish, with dim lights in the pannelled walls; Valère was aware of huge bowls of flowers, may—and

they say that it is unlucky—in profusion, lilacs and early syringa, the flower of the saracen's brides. She had the feeling that this was her own bridal and yet knew that it could not be, for her bridal had been that day in Dubrovnik with the heat coming up from the earth, and the terrible feeling of being enclosed, the olive trees withering, and Leo looking at her and wondering about the voyage home in the little tramp steamer which would only take people with a British passport.

A British passport! These who lived here in this small village away from harm, but had little idea of the terror that had swept across the world, of the men and women who had died tortured, and of the agony that had pursued Valère as she came on the long journey to this sanctuary. Because it was sanctuary, and she knew it. As she crossed the hall, with its leather sofas and the grand piano against the far wall on which the huge white bowl of white lupins was disposed, she promised herself that she would have a talk with Ivan. She would tell him about Leo. Something must be done! They could not possibly spoil both their lives for a man in the background who did not really want her.

Old Biggs led them, pattering on ahead through a small corridor from which the stairs rose beyond in a double fan to an iron ballustraded landing with an oriel window. He paused outside a door. "His lordship," he said.

"Right," said Ivan and opened it for Biggs.

Beyond lay the library; it was a large room lined with books, save over the fireplace where a big picture was hung, lit by an electric light concealed above it. The picture was of a ship made in the fashion of the wooden ships of long ago, its sails bellying out and before it the open sea. An old man was sitting in the chair by the fireplace, tall, angular and thin; he rose out of the chair, reaching for an ivory handled stick; Valère could see him, and he was not unlike Ivan save that he was very much fairer, and it seemed to take him a long time to

reach his full height. The clothes that he wore were old-fashioned, relict of a period almost forgotten, gracious, easy clothes, made for a leisurely life. He looked across at Valère.

"Here she is Grandpa," said Ivan joyously.

"You are extremely welcome," said the old man, "I fear you must have had a difficult journey; so much traffic on the roads these holiday-times, so difficult to get anywhere."

"Really it wasn't too bad."

Ivan had gone over to the side where a table had bottles arranged on it, and a large silver box of cigarettes with a silver lighter. "A drink, Valère?"

"I am really rather thirsty."

"I'll make it a long one. More ice, Biggs. Biggs, bring some more ice."

All the time she knew that the old man was watching her keenly, though not obtrusively. His brows were shaggy, they almost met, grey eyes beneath them were penetrating, and seemed to read right into her. She had the feeling that he liked her, and knew that there was nothing hostile about his attitude and manner, he was in fact the reverse.

"You work in London?" he said.

"Yes, with clothes."

"I must say you have admirable taste in your own. The great thing is to choose a career that gives you the chance to air the talent that is predominant. You obviously have a talent for beautiful clothes."

"Thank you," she said rather humbly, for she realised that he meant it as a compliment.

"I told you you'd like her, Grandpa." Ivan had come from the side table now with a tall glass in his hand for her. "She's different from the usual type."

"If I may say so, she is charming," said the old man gently.

"You're very kind." He almost made her want to cry. She stood there feeling rather little-girl and helpless; it

reminded her of home, of the stately rooms in that large house in the *Frauengasse* of her parents who had loved her so intensely, who had spoilt her maybe, always kindly, always admiring.

The old man saw it; he said, "Have another sandwich, you've come a long way, and picnic meals are never very satisfactory, are they?"

And merely for something to do she took one.

They chatted of the village, all the small talk about people she had never heard of. The old butler was failing, his memory was the difficulty, he kept on forgetting things and getting distressed about it, the distress being more difficult to fight than his forgetfulness, but he was very old. He had come originally as a button boy to the Hall, at the time when old Lord Burystone's father had been alive and just failing; Biggs would never admit his age but they knew that it was something tremendous.

"Sylvia Robson is back," said the old man.

Instantly Valère knew that she galvanized all her forces. Sylvia was back, the girl they wanted Ivan to marry, who lived in the house with the too frequent windows, and set back from the road.

"Oh, is she?" asked Ivan. He spoke quite coolly as though it did not really interest him. Valère was immensely grateful for his indifference.

"Mrs. Robins has been ill and they sent for Sylvia. I think this time she will have to stay at home permanently, for her mother has really been very bad. Angina, you know."

"That's an infernal complaint to get hold of."

"Yes, I doubt if she'll ever really recover from it; people don't. I don't suppose she is in immediate danger of dying, obviously she isn't, but she'll never be actually well again. It has worried Sylvia a good deal having to give up all her work to come back. She got keen on her committees, and is now

tied to the apron string of a sick woman, which is a bad contrast and she feels it, poor girl!" then quietly, "perhaps you'll see her. She'd like to meet Valère."

For a moment it crossed Valère's brain that this old man was still scheming for a future with Sylvia. For a second it occurred to her that although he made the suggestion quietly, as though it did not matter much, he had more behind it.

They sat up talking for a long time, then glancing at the clock they saw that it was almost midnight.

"I say, you'll be worn out," said Ivan, "you'd better go off now so as to be up bright and early. I've lots to show you round about in the morning. Is Mrs. Bickerstaff seeing after her Grandpa?"

"Yes."

They rang a bell and Mrs. Bickerstaff appeared; a small round little woman, well into the sixties, with an apple of a face and hair widely parted in the centre and looped over her ears. She rustled as she walked, for she wore a black taffeta frock with a small scalloped apron. Mrs. Bickerstaff was the power behind the house, which for years she had run. She had been in command when Ivan himself had come here as a small baby; she had got the old nurseries ready for his reception, and had suffered with his grandfather the anxiety for that gipsy mother who had ultimately deserted him. Mrs. Bickerstaff had lived entirely for the family, and she exerted herself on their behalf all the time. With them she suffered or rejoiced.

"This way," she said to Valère.

She led Valère up the fan of stairs, with the iron lace of a balustrade, brought to the Hall by an ancestor from a Venetian home four generations previously.

They went along the landing carpeted in dark cherry velvet pile to the door at the far end. Mrs. Bickerstaff going on ahead, opened it, turned on the lights, and beyond Valère saw the pleasant room with the pale green carpet and the

gay cretonne-covered windows. On the cretonne there sprawled bunches of vivid country flowers; peonies and roses, clematis and delphiniums. The little bed was a half-tester hung in curtains to match.

"I hope you'll be quite comfortable here," said Mrs. Bickerstaff, "you must let me know if there is anything you'll be wanting."

"I'm sure I shall be quite happy," and then suddenly, because there was something appealing about Mrs. Bickerstaff's little friendly face. "You've been here almost all your life?"

"Almost all my life miss, and so happy with them. His Lordship is a fine gentleman to be with, and we all love him. Mr. Ivan is a darling but wilful. He will go his own way; his poor father would go his own way too, and of course that led to trouble." She smiled rather fondly.

"I know. He fell in love."

Mrs. Bickerstaff nodded. "And the worst of people falling in love miss, is that they get it most violently when it is for the wrong person."

"The gipsy has never come back?"

For a moment a flicker passed Mrs. Bickerstaff's face, she looked at Valère almost as though she would read her thoughts, then she came a step closer dropping her voice. "His Lordship believes she has never come back, we wouldn't like to worry him, and of course Mr. Ivan doesn't know. After all she is his mother, and it might make matters very difficult for him. But she does come back sometimes. Oh, not here miss, naturally not here. She wouldn't like to come here to the hall. But she is seen in the neighbourhood at times, she sells clothes pegs and tells fortunes and all that sort of thing, but of course she would never show her face here."

"No, of course."

"You won't tell Mr. Ivan, miss?"

"Of course not."

"I thought I could trust you, that was why I told you. Would you like me to help you out of your things miss, or turn on the bath for you?"

"No, thank you. I'll be quite all right."

"Then I'll say good night, miss." She went across the pale green carpet rustling as she walked. She closed the door softly behind her. Valère stood there staring across the room, wondering what strange events had brought her to this moment, hardly able to believe that it was herself. Then her eyes caught the light on an exquisite oil painting hung above the mantelpiece. It was a picture of a cobbled street with the sea beyond, jade and lapis as only sunlit sea can be. A plumbago in a shower of blue blossom trembled about a balustrade with a broken column. A cypress in its blue cocoon stood with that motionless unruffled beauty of all cypresses, looking at the sky. It was Dubrovnik.

CHAPTER VI

NEXT morning when the curtains were drawn Valère saw the vista of parkland, with the trees, and rising behind it Exmoor, in its rugged wild loveliness with the rowans in their cream foam of blossom and the wild ponies straggling. She was glad that she had come here. To-day she had made up her mind that she would tell Ivan of Leo. She would tear down the barrier between them, it was absurd to sacrifice one's whole life to a marriage of convenience, to a marriage for a passport on one side, and for earrings and pearls on the other. Yet Leo had returned the price of his marriage, and she had held on to her bargain. She wished that she did not feel so uneasy about him, if only for the reason that she had this extraordinary feeling about him, the feeling that in her heart she loved him.

Quietly. A dormant passion that perhaps was no passion at all but an abiding emotion. She had respected the fact that he did not attempt to make anything out of that marriage, that sheer kindness of heart had made him enter into it, with the idea of saving her, and that he had saved her.

But she would tell Ivan—and to-day.

She went down to breakfast, set on a terrace, with the Italian garden before them in little white steps with formal urns, brimmed with fuschias and pink geraniums. Ivan wore a yellow sweater with a turtle neck and grey slacks; he looked different, better she thought, for the yellow suited him and much of his gipsy mother flamed up in his face.

"Grandpa never appears until lunch," he said, "the old

man doesn't like admitting it but he is older than Biggs, and poor old Biggs has one foot in the grave."

"Everyone here seems to be very old."

"Probably because the Hall lost a generation, my father's generation, which is entirely missing."

"Don't you ever wonder about your mother?"

He looked at her quizzically. "There was a time when I used to wonder about her a lot, now I don't think that I bother any more. I have the feeling that had she wanted to come back she would have done so. She has never been this way since."

"I wonder if you'd know if she had been?"

"Yes, I should. She'd go to the cottage."

"The cottage?"

He looked at her. "I'll take you there this morning, after you have finished your food. It's a little cottage that my father built. He used to go there to paint. It is very small but lovely, and there is the most exquisite view from it. I made a rule always to leave it unlocked, in case she ever wished to return. I used to put food there. I don't now because it was never touched. I very much doubt if anyone ever crosses the threshold, save to keep the place clean."

"Perhaps she never knew of it."

"Oh, but she did. My father did most of his love-making there, and they used it as a meeting place. You may be sure that there was a dreadful bust-up with Grandpa, so that they couldn't meet here, and that was always known as their trysting place."

"I'd like to see it."

"You shall," he promised.

She went upstairs for the jade green hat, the one that went so well with the off-white suit that she wore, and they took the little car, driving out of the park gates, and on to Exmoor itself. The views were bewilderingly beautiful. They

dropped down a ragged lane, and at the far end she could see the cottage standing. It was unlike any other cottage, built only by a fanciful imagination for painting. It was surrounded by a ragged fringe of trees, firs with tattered boughs, and pink hairy stems. The cottage was white and thatched, its loggia had room for an easel, an old one was propped against the wall, its door, as Ivan had promised, was open.

He went ahead, entering the room before her. It was light and airy, pregnant with quivering sunshine, for it had been built to admit a strong light. The windows were everywhere, and all unshuttered, but at the far end of the room was a portrait which reached almost from floor to ceiling. It was the picture of a young gipsy woman life size, standing with her basket of cheap wares for sale poised bulkily on one hip, whilst she looked challengingly out at the artist. She stood in a yew arch, with an absurd topiaried peacock above her. She had a rusty red shawl on her shoulders, and a skirt of vivid yellow and blue, the colour so often seen on pantaloons and clowns on the stage; her hands were small and beautifully-shaped, yet work-stained, her face was vivid.

"So there she is?" said Valère, and she walked towards the picture.

The painted eyes followed her; they were bird-bright and dark, staring at her with a mixture of cock-sureness and defiance. Her hair hung limply in ragged curls, her mouth was of promise. Valère knew how the artist must have felt for that lovely little creature into whose small primitive body so much had been put and with so great an abandon. She was more animal than woman, of course, but what an attractive little animal!

"You think that she is pretty?" asked Ivan.

"Not pretty, beautiful."

"And quite untamed. Like her son," he said.

Valère wanted to make a clever answer, but turning and seeing the same bird-bright defiance in his eyes, the words were halted in her throat. "Is he untamed?"

"Where you are concerned, completely. My mother took what she wanted, and I take what I want." He came nearer to her and the hands closing on her shoulders were commanding. "I want you, you know."

"There are reasons why I cannot ever . . ."

"What reason could there be?"

'I've-got-to-tell-him,' she thought, 'and now is the moment.' Here, where his father's love scenes were enacted, and yet turning she saw beyond him the eyes of his mother painted on that canvas, and the absurdity of the peacock intopriary atop the arch. And, as if by contrast, that other picture which she had fallen asleep looking at last night, Dubrovnik with the pale blue of the plumbago, the cobbled streets, and the sea more vividly green and blue than any other sea.

"Ivan, we've got to have a talk."

"This is the best place in the world for us to discuss it. If you think you can escape me you are wrong. You are quite wrong."

"Ivan, there is another man."

"Ye Gods! What a fool I've been, I've never thought of that one. You are in love with him?"

"I don't know. Half and half."

"It ought to be easy to cut him out. I'll make you love me so much that you'll never give him a second thought."

"I doubt if you could do that."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"Little idiot! Darling little idiot! That's a fine sort of a lover to have; he disappears and leaves you all alone; when did you last see him?"

"In the middle of the war."

"Good Heavens! Grounds for a divorce, and you are still staying faithful to him, why you might just as well have been married to him, what a darling little puritan!"

She had been going to say I-am-married-to-him when she heard a sound. It was little more than the wind in the trees, less than the sound of frost on grasses, but it attracted her attention. She turned her head to the far window just in time to see something disappear; it was a rust red shawl, tawny as a robin's breast, much the same colour and a glimpse of a woman's foot. No more!

"Look Ivan, look, a gipsy! She must have been watching us?"

"Surely not?" For a second he hesitated, then he ran across the room and out of the door. The wind stirred the fir trees, and the young bracken in green croziers, the grasses and the gorse, but there was no sign of a gipsy. He went round the house, with its fine view of the valley and of the moor, but he saw no vestige of the woman in the rust-red shawl. She had gone like a ghost.

When he came back Valère was sitting on the loggia looking at the view. She knew that the woman had been no ghost, Mrs. Bickerstaff had been right, the shadow of Ivan's mother still lurked round the place; she did not go to the Hall (she would have been afraid to do that) but she came here. The food and wine had remained untouched because she probably wanted to keep her visits secret and that would have proved them. But it was a secret that the women shared, and about which Ivan knew nothing.

"You must have dreamt it, darling, nothing was there, nothing at all. She couldn't possibly have got away because you can see the whole of this stretch of the moor from the back of the cottage."

"Perhaps I did dream it; the place is full of dreams. It is lovely, it has an atmosphere."

"The atmosphere of gipsies and of intrigue," he said, and laughed. "Now tell me some more? We were talking about this man of yours, what was his name?"

"I don't think I want to talk about him any more."

"I'll get it out of you. I'll beat him at his own game, you know. I shan't let this rest. If you think I am handing over the woman I want most in the world to any man, you're wrong."

It was curious that she should feel so suddenly weary, she wanted to draw a screen across the whole affair with Leo, she couldn't tell Ivan now. They went back to the car, and all the time she was wondering why that gipsy had come back to the cottage. Mother love? That strong silver cord which ties mothers and sons together. Yet the eyes that had stared at her from the canvas were not maternal eyes, they held little real warmth. They had had cunning, they were scheming, but they were not tender eyes. She must have wanted something or she would never have come back, knowing full well as she must have done that everybody in the village knew of her and looked out for her. Or, had she misled herself with the idea that time had changed it all and that they had forgotten her. Valère doubted that, for the gipsies are hot-blooded people, and shrewd; they know that men and women do not forget.

The car passed into the village, and stopped outside the little bakery. "They make good coffee here," said Ivan, "surprising in a village shop where usually they have not a mind beyond a nice cup of tea, but Madame came from France, something that the baker picked up in the war, and she'll make you exquisite coffee, and serve it as only a French-woman can."

"I'd like it," said Valère slowly.

They went inside; the little place was blue and white and Madame had lank dark hair, wet with grease, and looped

over her ears. She brought the coffee at a small table, which was hung with a blue-patterned cloth. There were sun blinds which stretched before the shop in vivid stripes of blue and orange, bold vigorous stripes, something that Madame had brought with her when she came from Boulogne, so Ivan told Valère. About the place there hung the scent of hot bread and croisettes, of brioche and patisserie, like the shop in Shepherd's Market.

They had just got their coffee, piled high with whipped cream when a girl crossed the street from the opposite side of the road, and entered the little shop. She was tallish, rather robustly built, the type that so often came into Mr. Mollinson's to watch the mannequins that paraded the salon, and then wondered why they never looked quite the same when they got the clothes on themselves. Valère noticed that she wore well-cut and expensive clothes, but at the same time they were not worn to advantage because little care was taken of them in the way they were put on. The hat was at the wrong tilt, the gloves were the wrong shade; the frock hung a shade too limply. She had good pearls fastened at the throat with a turquoise clasp, and on her wrist there jingled a fascinating bracelet of golds seals. She was blonde, with a may-blossom prettiness which the English carry so exquisitely, a pink and white skin, blue eyes with delicately darkened lashes, and soft fair hair that curled round her face.

As she entered the shop, she looked across at Valère's companion.

"Good gracious. It's Ivan," she said.

She gave an enquiring glance at Valère; there was nothing hostile about the look, merely one of surprise.

"This is Valère," said Ivan rising, "and this, Valère, is one of my oldest friends, if not quite my oldest friend, Sylvia Robson."

In Valère's head there echoed suddenly and for no reason whatsoever that old song,

Who is Sylvia?

Who is she?

So this was the girl they had told her of, the one that the family wanted him to marry. Valère knew at once that she was undoubtedly cut out to be his wife, she had charm, she had breeding; she was exquisite in that particular English way, and that they made a contrastingly attractive pair, he with his dark sleek hair, she with her fair curls and ingenuous blue eyes.

"How do you do?" she said, and then, "I do hope you don't mind if I butt in? I haven't seen Ivan for such a long long time, do let me share your table for coffee?"

"Of course, I'll ask Madame for more," said Ivan.

But Madame had gone into the bakehouse and did not come back immediately in answer to Ivan's call. He was the impatient sort, he could never wait for anything, and he fluttered across into the bakehouse to find her. It was over the small flagged yard, made out of a converted barn which had shaggy eaves and bent like a little old man across the garden. There was a clematis climbing up it in a wreath of white blossom that smelt sweet. Inside there were a couple of ovens and a huge deal mixing table, and Madame bustling about in a state of perturbation.

Sylvia looked at Valère, she tapped out a cigarette on a case of platinum with her initials in rose diamonds curled into a corner. "I haven't seen you before," she said.

"I only arrived last night."

"You've known Ivan a long time?"

"We met at a dance."

"He dances beautifully. He's very attractive don't you

think? I adore him, I always have," yet she said it half shyly, almost as though she was afraid of a snub.

"He does dance very well."

Sylvia lit the cigarette carefully. "I've known him all my life you see; we used to go to parties as children; we met a lot, and played together. He used to break my dolls for me; he was terribly brutal with my dolls but I always forgave him. Ivan is the sort of man whom you forgive anything, you know."

"I suppose he is," said Valère quietly.

"He was always a darling. It's a lucky girl who marries him," and then slowly, "I'm so very fond of Ivan you know." This was hardly what Valère had expected. She had thought that Sylvia would be distrustful of her, even jealous, but she had not thought of her as being pathetic. Sylvia made no attempt to hide her feelings, it was plain that she was desperately fond of Ivan, far fonder of him than he would ever be of her. The realisation that she was in love with him, almost hurt Valère; she did not know what to do.

"He's a dear," she said.

Sylvia lit a cigarette and slowly smoked it. "Ivan is so impetuous, and impulsive, I suppose that is his mother in him; he is the sort of young man who never really grows up, he's not completely grown up now, you know, in spite of the fact that he carried you away with him."

"He does so many things well, and yet I suppose you would say that he was a bit spoilt; his grandfather worships him, and lives in constant terror of his repeating his father's mistake. He ran away with that gipsy, and of course it shattered the family."

"I don't think that Ivan will repeat his father's mistake."

"Nor I."

Then they saw that he was returning from the bakery carrying a plate of cakes with him, and laughing at Madame's

protestations. He WAS an overgrown schoolboy, hyper sophisticated when it came to women, super childish when it came to the smaller things of life.

"Well, and how are the girls getting on?" he asked as he set the cakes down on the table.

"We're okay," said Valère.

She liked Sylvia; that was the one thing that she had not expected to do. She actually *liked* her.

"I wanted you two to meet, Sylvia is a very old friend of mine, aren't you?"

Sylvia looked at him and smiled faintly. "We met at parties when he wore sailor suits and I wore penwiper frocks," and she laughed, but behind that laugh there was something that Valère noted. She loved Ivan. The emotion that she felt for him was not trivial and passing, but deep and enduring. It would continue for ever. Even if he married Valère (and Valère had to admit that she was playing with the idea), even then Sylvia would go on loving him.

"You were always a good friend," said Ivan, "when I couldn't do my Latin exercises, Sylvia helped me. I had a tutor you know, a dreadful fellow who expected an intolerably high standard, Grandpa is keen on Latin, and Sylvia has a genius for it."

"Well, it's so easy."

"I never found it so," he said.

"I always did."

They sat there drinking the coffee which was quite unlike any village coffee, and they ate the cakes hot from the oven. As they were finishing, the vicar's wife crossed the road, diverting Ivan's attention; she wanted him to help her with some fête she was getting up, and he did not want to be dragged into it. He had a belief that politeness would steer him out of a difficult situation far more quickly than anything else. He went out of the little shop to tell her about it, and the girls

were left alone once again against the blue and white background, and the dark sloe-like eyes of the Frenchwoman who watched them from the bakery.

Sylvia was very different from everything that Valère had ever expected; she put her arms on the table. "I'm so glad to have met you: fortunate that I came here to-day. You're very lucky. Ivan is not entirely a lady's man, he gives you that impression, but he seldom has affairs."

"He's a very fascinating person."

As she stubbed out her cigarette in a tiny blue tray Valère saw on the china the bluebird of happiness, and for a moment felt that this was almost an omen. "You know that I've cared for him all my life? There has never been anybody else but Ivan for me, and once I thought that perhaps he felt the same about me. He didn't, you know."

"You're terribly brave!"

"It was his people, and my people; you know what relations are like! They had planned the whole thing ever since I was a little child, and he a tiny boy. They wanted us to marry and fostered the idea. It was easy for me because I think I have always loved him. Ivan for a time thought that he felt the same way about me, but he didn't really. We split. I've been trying to forget about him, it . . ." she gave a pitiful little smile . . . "it hasn't worked out well, I'm afraid."

"Poor Sylvia!" Valère put out a hand and touched hers sympathetically.

"It's all right. All I want for Ivan is happiness. If you marry him, promise me that you will make him happy. He is difficult in lots of ways, you think him sophisticated, I know that part of him has never grown-up. He's like that. He needs somebody to take care of him and help him, and he himself doesn't really know it." She swept the crumbs down from her frock and got up. "Well, that's that!" she said pleasantly.

Valère did not know what to do. Sylvia was such a sweet personality, she was not the haughty daughter of some stand-offish county family as Valère had expected her to be, she was tenderly understanding and the thought was a reproach to Valère. It was dreadful to have to hurt a sweet person, and she hated doing it.

"You're a darling not to hate me," she said. "I should never feel as you do about another girl and Ivan I'm sure, I'd be dreadfully jealous."

"Would you? I don't think that I have ever been jealous of anybody or anything in my whole life. I wasn't made that way."

"I do hope we are going to be friends; I don't see how that is possible because in your heart you must feel resentful of me, but I do want to be friends."

"We *will* be friends," promised Sylvia.

Then they went out into the street, where the vicar's wife was chattering to Ivan and he was trying to make a polite get-away and failing. They stayed for a while to join in the conversation, then they each went their way.

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Ivan took her for car rides all that day. He wanted to show Valère Somersetshire, perhaps one of the most beautiful of the English counties, with the richest possessions. They went to the shore, they saw Porlock, a loving little village twined through a maze of fuchsias hedges and cobble yards to the sea. They saw the smugglers alleys at Minehead, and the charm of old-world villages where white cottages nestle beneath the kindly shelter of the hills. At night they dined with his grandfather and afterwards walked in the garden.

It was very hot, almost thunder-heat and Valère did not need the wrap that Ivan had insisted on her wearing.

They sat in the Italian garden, its white steps gleaming in the dusk, and there was the faint scent of dying lilacs and early roses blending in one; a syringa bush heavily budded from the far end filled the air with its too-sweet perfume. There was a white seat sheltered by a closely clipped yew hedge, and although there was no *topiary* work, it reminded Valère of that other hedge, the dark yew one which had formed the background for his father's romance with the gipsy in the rusty red shawl.

"We've got to talk," said Ivan. "You know why I brought you here this week-end, don't you?"

"You wanted me to see your home."

"I wanted you to see my background and everything that belongs to me. But it wasn't only that, what is more, you knew that it wasn't only that."

"I . . . I don't think I want to talk about it Ivan," she said in an effort to postpone the moment, a fruitless effort and she knew it as she spoke.

"We've got to talk about it. Darling, the first moment that I saw you I knew that this was going to happen."

She couldn't lie about it. "I knew as well, Ivan."

"It's always like that when you meet somebody who is really important in your life. You know the moment that you enter the same room, or the same garden, or the same vicinity; you know that even though they are still strangers to you they are going to be tremendously important in your life; or have been in some other life."

"In some other?"

"We are no strangers you and I, Valère. Perhaps we meet again after a long long break, but you and I loved centuries ago, Heaven knows where, Heaven knows when, but it was planned that we should go on loving all through the ages."

A pretty fairy tale, no more! The nonsense that all lovers

talk, she told herself, yet could not dismiss it so easily. "Ivan, we mustn't be foolish."

"It would be crazy not to take what is ours to take, and for always. I'm asking you to marry me darling, I'm asking you to walk right into my life here and now, and never go out of it again. I have the feeling that last time, (and last time may have been somewhere in ancient Egypt, in Damascus or in Cyprus, or the other side of the world where the azaleas flower rose and amber long the road to Nikko), but I have the feeling that somewhere we missed an opportunity and in consequence have been centuries apart. It was meant that I should walk into that ballroom the other day, meant that we should meet again, and love for a whole lifetime."

"Ivan, there is so much to explain."

"Nothing can override the fact that once, the last time we missed a lifetime of loving by one of us being foolish and whether it was Damascus, or Cyprus, or the road to Nikko doesn't matter; we missed! We are not going to miss one another again."

She had got to pull herself together and not to let him go on in this fool's paradise.

"Ivan, I told you there was a reason."

"What reason can there be?"

"There is one definite reason why you and I cannot marry. Let us have this week-end and then pass out of each other's lives."

"No, nothing would make me do so crazy a thing. Nothing. Ever. We did that last time. Life is not given to us to repeat the old mistakes and so never to learn the lesson. You know that in your heart. You do, darling, and I . . . I love you so much."

His face was coming closer to hers. She could feel the warmth of his arms enclosing her, and he drew her to him, almost as though it were to leave behind them all pain and

argument, all anxiety. She felt his mouth descend upon her own, and knew that for one brief time¹ (or was it eternity?) they drifted out together, as one. When he released her, she was trembling.

"My own," he said, "you know what you mean to me, and how much more you are going to mean to me. I could never let you go again."

The weaker side of her nature wondered if she could possibly postpone the moment, and so never mar the exquisite beauty of the night? Resolutely she thrust it from her.

"Listen, Ivan, you have got to hear something of what happened to me."

"I know what happened. You were born in Danzig, your father died in a concentration camp there, you almost crawled your way to safety."

"I hate talking of it, for it was a terrible experience and I can never feel that it has gone for ever from my life; when you have suffered so terribly, you live in constant dread of that suffering returning, and if it did return I could never face the horror again."

"It will not return," said Ivan slowly.

"Whatever that may be let me tell you what happened. I went to an aunt in Jugo Slavia. I thought she would be there, but she had gone, she had married an Englishman and had come to Swansea, and although I followed her here to England, I have never found her, and I believe that she is dead. So many died in that horror, so many of our Jewish people."

He said nothing. There seemed little that he could say, only that he held her hand closer and sat there like the Apollo carved in stone in the centre of the rose bed beneath them. Etched whitely by the rising starlight, Apollo ruled that rose bed.

"The war came nearer to me, and I had to make an escape.

There was a tramp steamer leaving for Wales, and she was carrying passengers, British passengers. I was Polish, I had a forged passport, but it would never have got me to England and I knew it."

"You poor child!" he said, and held her even more closely.

"I did what hundreds of other women did in such an emergency, I married an Englishman."

It seemed that he had turned to stone, and that it was Apollo himself who sat beside her. When he spoke again his voice seemed to have changed. "You married? You never told me that you were married, Valère?"

"We were married for a few hours only, and then I sailed. It was a marriage entirely of convenience, no more. I have never seen him since!"

She could not tell him now that it was Leo the man who saved his life at Dubrovnik when he was bathing, the man who had been at the same school with him, the school that never breaks faith. For another moment Ivan sat there as though stunned, then he said, "We will find him and arrange a divorce. He cannot possibly want to tie you to him when the marriage was like that. Probably a sum of money would be sufficient."

"I don't think he wanted money."

"My experience of life is that they all want money. Money is the latch key to most doors, it picks almost every lock, when you come to think about it."

She hesitated. "There is another point, it is rather a difficult point. That evening when we sat together waiting for the boat to sail, we talked. The war was coming nearer and nearer all the time; it was terrifying to hear the explosions in the distance, and to know—as we knew then—that in time the horror must sweep the whole of Europe. His people were Catholics."

"Then they would not tolerate divorce."

"No, they would not tolerate divorce."

She had not remembered that until the other night when she had lain awake in that room at the Hall with the cretonne curtains on which great bouquets of garden flowers were splashed in a riot of colour. Then she remembered. Leo had said something about a divorce, he had mentioned it casually, yet she had seen the small rosary that he carried in his pocket, silver chain and intermittent pearls, a pearl cross. And pearls mean tears, she had told herself.

One could not associate the two; a divorce and that rosary of silver and pearl.

"How long were you together?" asked Ivan.

"A few hours; the boat sailed the next morning."

"The next morning?" He glanced across at her. She saw jealousy in his eyes, suspicion.

"You are quite wrong," she said, "he was never my husband in more than the ceremony. Nothing more than that at all."

"Then he would not mind having the wedding annulled."

"Annulled?"

"Of course, it was no marriage." His arms came closer round her. "Can you imagine marriage to me being so empty or so entirely meaningless? You can't, you know. You mean something to me, something more than that. He must have been a cold sort of person. . . ."

"He wasn't. He was honourable. He gave me my life, and what more can a man do for a woman?"

"Surely he asked some price? Men don't do that sort of thing for nothing, in particular the type of men you meet in that sort of a place."

"Yes, he asked some jewels."

"I thought so. Money talks! Jewels speak all languages, they say, and it's true. He just asked your jewels."

She did not know why it made her angry. She did not want Ivan to say unkind things about Leo who had done such a lot

for her. "He sent them back," she told him, "they came to me only a little time ago, these earrings, and this string of pearls with the big emerald clasp."

The moon came out, a vigorous moon nearly at the full, and as if by irony lit the pearls with a milky loveliness, touching the emeralds with green fire. They sparkled in Valère's ears, almost as if to dazzle him.

"They are very beautiful jewels," he said, "the man must have been a fool to throw them back at you."

"Or honourable."

"You have a greater faith in men than I have; I doubt if there are so many honourable men who do that sort of thing; he probably will want more from you."

"Somehow I don't think he will."

There was stillness. Valère thought that Ivan's arms had become less fond, and for a moment wondered if they had already reached the rift. Then he said. "We'll find him even if we have to comb the world for him, and if he is so honourable he will let you go. I'm going to marry you, Valère, it will be one of Mollinson's showy weddings, with you looking like you did the day I popped in at that silly old duchess's display, silver and lace with lilies. For me. All for me, my sweet!"

They had passed the rift. Never again would she remember the shade and lapis of the Dubrovnik sea in quite the same way, nor the little room where she had sat that night with Leo, to whom she was married and held in a far closer bond than any that existed between her and Ivan; yet she had never been so close to the man himself.

Ivan kissed her again, and the rest of the world was shut out.

"We'll go in and tell Grandpa," he said.

"Not yet, Ivan. There is too much to arrange. We must get the annulment settled."

"Yes, yes of course. What do you want me to do about it?"

"I'll go to a solicitor myself the moment that I get back to town."

She didn't want to. She must be crazy but she wanted both Leo and Ivan. Leo had behaved magnificently to her, yet here she was discarding him as one would cast aside a suit of clothes for which no longer there is any use. She would be throwing him away.

"He has probably married a dozen girls under just the same circumstances," said Ivan gaily. "I know these Don Quixotes who go about Europe helping damsels in distress, and themselves to their jewels as a little sop by the way."

"He never helped himself to my jewels; he sent them back to me," she said.

"You are determined to take his side; I believe that you are still in love with the fellow."

"No, I was never in love with him," she said slowly. She had never been in love with him, that was the truth, but she had a feeling that was stronger than liking. There had been a strong bond between them, welded during the night when they had been in that tiny hotel room together, with the war coming nearer all the time, with hostile wings above the building, with distant explosions, the scent of sand and olive trees and the creamy pink-flecked blossoms of the oleanders all rising in heady waves together.

She said no more.

They sat on for a while with no need for words; his arms about her, his cheek against her own, and the feeling that now he knew, and they were one. The moon rose, and reigned over the garden from a perfect sky that was flecked with stars. The night was made for romance. And, if the garden grew chilly, she did not notice it for his arms never cooled, his lips were all the more demanding.

"Darling, I do love you so much."

"Oh Ivan."

"Say that you love me a little. I'll teach you to love me enormously, but for now, say that you love me a little."

"I can't Ivan, I mustn't."

"You're thinking of him. You shan't think of him any more. I'm jealous. I'm one of those crazily jealous people, and I won't tolerate it. You shall think of me, only of me. Say that you love me, Valère."

And tenderly in his ear, hardly above a whisper because it was so true that the thought of it made her feel quite faint. "I love you, Ivan, oh, I do love you so much."

Together they would shape a new world for themselves, they would fight the future, and their feeling for one another would triumph over any difficulties. So the moonlight lit her imagination, she wondered if it was true that maybe they had met before, lived before, and loved before, and that this emotion was only the continuation of some beauty, too lovely to be destroyed by the passage of the centuries?

The stable clock was striking two, when finally they went indoors, their arms about one another.

CHAPTER VII

TO-MORROW, Sunday, was the day for forgetting everything save themselves.

They came down to a late breakfast served in a row of silver dishes from the side, with old Biggs going from one to the other, and plugging in electric heater, and burning meths gallantly in the attempt to keep everything hot. Ivan's grandfather breakfasted in his room; he had come to the stage when he could not be expected to attend all meals downstairs.

It was a luxurious breakfast, and lots of it. Beyond the windows a hot sweet day was rising, with the trees of the park blue in the distant haze.

Valère had decided that to-day she would not mention Leo, because now that she had made a clean breast of the whole thing, she would thrust him out of her life. Ivan need never know his name, and certainly not that it was the man who had saved his own life. It was odd that Leo should have saved both of them, only to give them to one another. Valère tried to dismiss the thought, but it constantly recurred to remind her. Things like that are not so easily thrust aside, they return.

They went to church in the morning because the village expected it of them. It was a little church with red roses clustering against its granite walls and a tiny steeple from which the five bells rang merrily. Grandpa went in first leaning on his tall stick, walking slowly and carrying his hat in his left hand as he had done for years. For centuries this family had worshipped here, from the same pew facing the

same altar, now dressed in scarlet and white for Whitsun. Oriental poppies merged with roses in bowls and were lit by pale candle-flame. There was something mysterious about them. Sitting there listening to it all Valère stared at the flowers, at the choristers with their downy heads and peacefully innocent eyes, sitting facing one another in rows, spruce above their clean white surplices, newly starched for the occasion.

On the walls there were monuments erected to the family. Ornate ones of the Victorian era, urns, weeping angels, and trumpeters and swords laid by. Fat cherubs looking mournful in marble supported stone sarcophagus. The whole chancel seemed to belong to the family. Grandpa led the way from church every Sunday, through the churchyard and across the village street, through the little rustic timbered gate which led to the short cut across the parkland, and along the path to home. Valère had the feeling that he believed that whilst he could still take his walk, he was not growing so dreadfully old. His father before him had given it up for some years before he died, said the old man cheerfully, he always found the path too hummocky, but he himself had never even noticed it.

"No, of course," she agreed.

As they walked under the trees sweet with birdsong, and the scents and lovely sounds of Whitsun when the world is at its sweetest, he went on talking. "You know, my dear, I'm very glad to have you here with us. I'm fond of Ivan, he is more to me even than my own son was. In many ways he is my own son, because of course I brought him up."

"He loves you."

"Yes, he loves me, but then his father loved me too. His father was a great disappointment to us all you know. Young men when they fall in love do make such bad mistakes; one

always trembles for the mistakes of youth; perhaps that is one of the penalties of growing old."

"Youth manages to survive its mistakes," she reminded him.

"Yes, yes, I know, but his father paid for his mistake, and I've always been worried that Ivan would pay for it too. That gipsy blood that is in his veins is wandering, unstable, and fickle. It's made that way. Oh, I know that years of careful training ought to overcome it, (and Ivan has had careful training), and all the love and attention that we could give him. But one is worried for him of course, can't help it."

"He's going to be all right," said Valère.

"Yes, he'll be all right; I know that now. At one time we all hoped that he would marry Sylvia Robins. She was the girl for him, not only because of her birth and that sort of thing, Heaven knows that we're not such snobs as that, but her temperament was so gentle and quiet, the sort that could manage him without giving him the idea that he was being married. Ivan is a curious nature, he does not need anything too volatile; he needs gentle understanding. The gipsy in him, of course."

She put her hand on the old man's arm. "I am quite sure that he will never disappoint you," she said quietly. "Ivan is far too fond of you to want to hurt you in any way, you know."

"I know, my dear, and you make me very happy." He stopped to pat her hand and regain his breath, for, although he would not admit it, nowadays the hummocky path took toll of him as it had taken of his father before him. He was quite glad for an excuse to stay a moment and linger there stroking her hand.

Then they went on again, through the iron gate that led into the far end of the garden, across the lawn shaved smoothly green, with a round curve of gravel and the house rising on

the far side, reigning over it all. The door was open, and she could see Biggs hawing to and fro. He always became concerned if his master did not get home quickly enough. Biggs remembered a horrid story of the old earl who had, in taking the short cut, missed an ant-hill and in consequence took a bad toss which had dislocated a hip, laying him low for a long time, and making him permanently lame.

"Ah, there you are, my lord," said Biggs coming out to welcome them.

There was liquid refreshment in the library, for although Lord Burystone went regularly to church and would not have changed the routine for all that he could see, Biggs knew that it was an ordeal for him and saw to it that refreshment was always ready as some small reward for the effort made. They went into the library, and the old man was ensconced in his pet chair, with a glass in his hand.

"Ivan's a long time," he said.

"I expect he has got himself caught up with all those frightful arrangements for the fête."

"Yes, usually when a clergyman's wife gets her claws in, she won't let go. Far better to do as I do, give them a lump sum on the understanding that they don't come and bother you."

"I expect they want help; somebody to run their side shows or something."

"I expect so too." He was looking at her thoughtfully. "Ivan is lucky in you, my dear. He has been a very lucky young man in many ways, and I am not sure that this has not been his luckiest shot of all."

"He is a darling," she said huskily, and there was a catch in her voice.

"Of course I think that. You have to tolerate your own children, but a man gets a grand chance to spoil his grand-children." His eyes twinkled, "and of course great

grand-children are there for great grandpapa's fun only." Now he actually laughed.

Ivan came in to lunch later; he had been dragged in to help at the fête in person; he and Sylvia had to run an orchard full of side shows, he said, and he could not in fairness to her back out. The village was short of people to give them a hand, and of course it really was his duty to do something for them he supposed. He could come down from town especially for it, and it was an immense relief to Sylvia who had expected that he would throw in his hand and do nothing.

"I'm glad you've taken it on," said his grandfather. "You ought to, and it isn't fair on that girl. These clergy have no conscience, they never mind who they lure in as long as it takes some of the burden off their own shoulders."

"Well, the whole committee consisting of about ten people has meant that each of this ten has had to do twenty folks work, I couldn't stand back."

"No, of course you couldn't." The old man hesitated. "What are you two doing this afternoon?"

"It's so hot I thought of running down to the sea for a bathe," said Ivan. "Like to come, Valère?"

"I'd adore it."

"That gives me the chance for a siesta." The old man laughed again, "it's quite shocking to get to my age, when all I want is forty winks, and a glass in my hand when I come to. I only live for eating and sleeping it seems. A pretty poor plan for life."

"As long as it appeals to you what does it matter to anyone else?" asked Ivan. "After all you've done so much in your life, you've earned a good rest, and now you're having it."

"Well, as long as you'll promise not to drown yourselves."

"We'll promise that," said Ivan.

They took the car and went to a little known beach which was entirely isolated. Ivan undressed behind the rocks leaving a little cave for Valère's use. The cave smelt of the sea; it was eerie, in some ways almost gloomy, but beyond it lay a dazzling picture of sunlight on the water, of a sea that wore white frills at her wrists, and of warm moist sand.

Valère got into the white bathing-dress with the single blue bird embroidered over the heart, that Mollinson had insisted on. She fastened the little turquoise shoes that matched, and the silken cap to protect her hair from any water, and which was so becoming. It fitted closely, but not too closely, and was tied with an attractive bow about it. It was not at all harsh or crude, but alluring.

Valère stepped out into the sunshine, to see Ivan sprawled on the beach wearing dark trunks only. He looked at her in amazement. "Darling, you're Heaven!" he said.

"I'm scared of the first contact with the water. It'll be shatteringly cold, I'm sure."

"I'll carry you."

"Nonsense, I'm much too heavy."

"You're light as love, because you ARE love," and he lifted her up into his arms. She would never forget his carrying her across that strip of sand to the sea, the first sound of the water splashing at his feet, the first upshot of spray that caught her.

"Oh Ivan, it is so cold."

"It's divinely warm."

Then suddenly she found that they were swimming side by side, cutting through the clear water round the end of the break water to the far cove where the beach curved into an attractive little bay, with primrose sands flecked with the cream pinkiness of shells on it. They swam side by side, two lean bodies cutting through the water, and when they grew tired of that they came in on a wave, washed up on to the

beach, and ran up it to lie there in the sunshine, their bathing clothes drying on them.

They sat against a breakwater, which smelt of salty weed, and wore it as a tasselled fringe, draped from the darkened wood. Ivan's hair dried in curls, of which he professed to be ashamed, pushing it back with his hand. He sat there in his dark shorts, and his big bronze body exposed to the sun. Valère felt that the moment was unreally beautiful as she curled her toes into the moist sand. There was a little rock pool alongside, she could see all manner of strange crustacea in it, whilst Ivan threw pebbles worn smooth by constant seas rising and falling over them.

They talked of silly unimportances, full of the joy of being merely alive.

"It's all such fun . . . living . . . Ivan." Yet it hadn't been fun that other time, that nightmare time when so much had happened.

"It'll be much greater fun getting married. I'll be a harsh husband, do you know that I shall probably beat you. When I get annoyed with you."

"Isn't that just cause and impediment for leaving a man?"

"I wouldn't know. I shall risk that. I believe in a wife being wholesomely afraid of her husband. It does her good. The get-up-them-stairs motif."

"Ivan, what a brute you sound."

"Oh, I am. There is that much of my mamma in me. After all a chap must inherit something from his mother."

"Yes, I suppose so. I wonder where she is. I wonder if she's still alive. I wonder if she ever thinks of you?"

"I hear she is married to some rascally gipsy who drives her about in one of those gaudy little vans. She has other sons too, gipsies all of them. A queer thing when you come to think of that. Me sitting here like this, and my brothers

scrounging my grandpa's park to poach his game. That's what happens I wouldn't mind betting."

"Well, your grandpa can spare some of it," said Valère and laughed.

"Yes, but he what takes what isn't his'n, when he's cotched'll go to prison. A nice thing that would be, if my brothers come up before the beak and are jugged for a month's hard. And it's very possible to happen too. No, I can't say that I admire my mother's taste," and he laughed and picked up little handfuls of the dry sand, and threw it into the pool. A crab scuttled away in discontent. An earthquake had upset his little world and was a major tragedy for him.

Valère turned and looked over her shoulder to the shore. There was a light wind that stirred the bleached grasses beside the cave where she had undressed, and she saw half way up the cliff, a tamarisk that had been beaten almost to the ground, bending before the prevailing wind. The cliff was in the shadow, and as she looked, Valère saw that someone was moving under it. It was a woman in a shawl. After all there was nothing unusual about a woman walking there in a shawl, and no reason for her concern on the matter, but she had the strange feeling that she was being watched and for a moment it occurred to her that Ivan's mother might be there. That she had been there for some time, watching them without either of them being aware of it.

But of course it was nonsense; she had deserted him, and had never made any move to approach him again or to ask for money for him. If it was true that she was married to some other rascally gipsy, and had gipsy sons of her own, that little world would occupy her. It was the sheerest nonsense to suppose that she was for a second interested in the baby that she had abandoned. The truth was that Valère was romantically minded, imaginative and letting her imagination run away with her.

Before she could stop herself, she said "Ivan?" imperatively as though she was afraid.

"Yes, what is it?"

Then, because she was ashamed of her sudden remark, she said "Oh, nothing, nothing at all," for now the rust red shawl had merged in with the shadows, like the natural plumage of some bird made by nature in camouflage.

But afterwards she had gone quiet, she didn't know why. She kept thinking of that woman she had seen, or was almost sure that she had seen, by the cliff.

"Well, all good things come to an end, it's time that we were getting home, my darling, or my old man will be anxious about us," said Ivan getting up.

He brushed the light sand from his limbs, and gave her a hand pulling her up. They walked up the beach together, and now the sand that had seemed so warm and comfortable when they went down to the water's edge, appeared to have grown heavy so that it was like toiling through a ploughed field.

"I to my rocks, you to your cave," said Ivan brightly when they reached the shaggy fringe of bleached grasses. "You are going to be my cave woman one of these days. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Ivan," she said.

She went on to the cave itself, and now she was afraid. It was stupid to feel this way, and to allow her imagination (for it had been nothing more) to run away with her and she knew it. But as she entered the cave itself, smelling of weed and salt, and that tang of the sea which nothing can change, she had the feeling, the insidious feeling that she could not stop, that someone had been here before her. She went over to her clothes laid neatly in a little pile on a rocky shelf. They were as she had left them, and yet not as she had left them. She knew they had been touched. She hesitated, glancing fearfully around the dim shadows of the cave, but no one was

there. If eyes watched her out of the darkness, they were not in a body.

She scrambled into her clothes, half afraid yet angry with herself for being so afraid, and she bundled out into the sunlight again, thankful for its clearness, before Ivan was ready.

She stood there fastening belt and blouse buttons, she must be going crazy to be so stupid; of course there had been no one there, of course she had not been watched. She did not know how she had come to be so foolish.

In the brilliance of the sunlight on the beach the world looked very real, and she was quite ashamed that she should have felt as she had done.

They drove back with the heat cooling, and the pleasure of the evening rising.

Valère changed into the white linen dinner frock that Mr. Mollinson had been so proud of. It had slick hard lines, it was faced with navy blue, like the *négligé* that she had worn in that sickening shelter, the first time that she had ever met him. She pinned a diamond brooch to the lapel, just as Mr. Mollinson had said. He had a flare for clothes, after all nobody could deny that, even old Mitzi gave him that much and he certainly deserved it.

After dinner was over, one of those elaborate meals, with Biggs pottering about behind his master's chair, they went into the little yellow drawing room, an Italian room, panelled in pale lemon silk. Valère played the piano to Lord Burystone, the polonaise to which Warsaw had died, and had been triumphant even in its death struggles. Brave Warsaw! There would never be any city in the whole world as unconquerable as Warsaw had been, when it had died so victoriously. It brought tears to Valère's eyes as she thought of it.

The old man noticed it.

"You must have been very proud of your country," he said tenderly, and with respect.

"Yes, I always shall be. Every Pole can only think triumphantly of the Poland that was, and pray for the Poland yet to be." She said no more, and he knew what she meant.

That night she and Ivan did not go into the garden but stayed with the old man, until on some flimsy excuse he went to bed. Then the two of them sat on, Valère still on the piano stool, her fingers on the piano playing Chopin and Ivan listening entranced. When she finished she went and sat beside him.

"My darling," he said, "to-night I have seen a deeper you. So far you have been just an angel who glittered into my life, the woman I want to marry more than I have ever wanted anything before. But to-night I have seen something more exquisite, something cultured and beautiful, a ghost of dead Poland, and the mother of my sons."

He stooped and kissed her on the brow; she knew then, as his lips touched her, that he had changed; this was not the same crazy romantically in love Ivan who had swept her off her feet, but what he felt at the moment was as the affection that Leo had given her.

Leo!

She wished that she did not hate the idea of consulting a solicitor the moment that she got back to London; she did not want to shatter that marriage, yet had to if there was to be any hope for the new one.

"You're a darling, Ivan."

"I hope to be good to you, always."

She said, "About Sylvia?"

"Good Heavens, what on earth could you want to know about Sylvia?"

"She's a very very charming person. Before I met her I was a little jealous, couldn't help that, I'm afraid, you know what women are! I thought of her as being different. I thought she would be the haughty kind; we get so many of them in

at Mollinsons, and I just loathe the whole breed. They look upon us as though we were the merest worms, when we are only earning our living in a perfectly reasonable way, the way we know best. I thought Sylvia would be like that."

"Good Heavens no. Truthfully, I have always felt rather bad about Sylvia. I had the idea that she was really rather fond of me."

"She was! She still is! Sylvia is the faithful kind I am sure, and that makes it all the harder. In a sense I'm dreadfully sorry for her, and feel that I butted in."

"I suppose I should have married her if there had been nobody else, probably because the family all wanted it so much, and also because she is quite the sweetest girl I know. But I've never been in love with her, I would have to be in love with the girl I married."

"But not too much in love."

"I could never be enough in love." He held her closer. "That's how I feel about you. That's why you mean so much to me. In love. Burnt up with the emotion for you."

"Be careful that the emotion is not so strong that it burns out," she warned him.

"It won't. I swear it won't. It will last for ever. You and I will still be in love when we are Grandpa's age. It's going to be Heaven, and all the time."

"I know." But first of all she must get her marriage annulled, and the feeling that it left her with was not a happy one. They went on talking. Much much later they said good night, and she was almost too enchanted to sleep. The next day was Whit-Monday, another long holiday.

The weather was being particularly kind to them; hot and languorous, so that they decided to go picnicking again, and as they started off they met Sylvia. She was walking along the lane gathering wild flowers.

"She collects them," Ivan told Valère, "she has an enormous

collection of the things, and has some extraordinary system of pressing them by which they do not lose their colour. It's really far more interesting than you'd think."

They stopped the car.

Sylvia smiled at them; it was, thought Valère, so sweet of her to take the friendship this way; she obviously bore no malice at all.

"We were going picnicking, probably to the cottage," said Ivan, "why don't you come along later?"

"I wouldn't want to be a gooseberry," she said and laughed.

"What are you doing to-day?"

"Nothing. Can you imagine what I'd do. Mother has not been so well, so that I can't leave her for very long. These bank holidays are always pretty dreary unless you make plans. I can't make plans as things are."

"Join us for lunch?" said Ivan.

"It would take me rather a long time to get to the cottage and back," she said.

"I tell you what I'll do. Valère and I are having a trip around, I'll leave her at the cottage to get the picnic spread out, (nothing like getting the women to do the work for you, is there?) then come and fetch you in the car. It won't take me ten minutes. Would you like that?"

"I'd adore it, Ivan." She had coloured up.

It pleased Valère that he had made this offer; she was glad to think that Sylvia would be having this little break in a rather drab life. Only last night she had heard Lord Burystone mentioning her mother, a thin-lipped martinet of a woman who was extremely difficult.

"Right, I'll be your way at a quarter to one, mind you don't keep me waiting," and he drove off. After a moment he said, "I hope you didn't mind my doing that? She is having rather a bleak time, poor kid."

"I think it was grand of you! I'm very very glad that she is coming with us, it was exactly what I wanted."

"You're a darling, you are kind to other people and I like that," he held her hand in his using only the one for driving.

What a morning on Exmoor, with flashes of the sea between the trees, with the wildness and ruggedness, with the marvellous views, and the farm where Lorna Doone once lived, and the Doone winding its way between boulders, and under quaint little bridges. They got out of the car at intervals, scrambling about bye-ways, and by brooks. But they came to the cottage at half past twelve, the cottage that an artist had designed for his gipsy bride, and Valère was left there to get the meal ready. She unpacked the basket, laying the contents on the table; then she paused and looked round the room. It was a single large room, barnlike, built for a studio, with a tiny rude stairway rising in the corner to a minstrel's gallery which had obviously been used for sleeping. She went to explore, climbing up the stairs, and into the gallery itself. From above she had an amazing view of the room, with a strange amethyst light falling on it from the top dormer windows. Surely it had been specially designed to give this light, she told herself.

It seemed to look like a cinema screen, a room in which drama was enacted, a room with meaning. And, as she stood there, she saw somebody silently cross the threshold and come inside.

It was a gipsy woman in a rusty red shawl.

She came walking like a girl, in that swinging stride from the hips, her body thrown back from the waist, her head erect. The hair was still glistening black, it was not frosted by time or by winter, as the ditches on either side the roadway down which her van rode. She was amazingly young looking, a little fuller, a trifle thicker, the colour more set but otherwise there was a closeness to that portrait on the wall, of the young

beautiful woman who had set a fire to the kindling of a young man's imagination.

She came into the room and stood there. It was obvious that she was well used to the place, knew her way about it, and came here often. She looked around her, her bright eyes appreciative. She looked up at the gallery where Valère stood, and Valère believing that the shadows hid her never moved a muscle. But she had not allowed for the intuition of the gipsy who lives by her observance and knowledge, and can see that to which others are blind.

She lifted a crooked finger and beckoned imperiously. She beckoned mechanically, all the time her lustrous dark eyes were on Valère's face.

Valère came down the stairs into the room; she crossed it and went to the gipsy standing there looking at her.

"I'm here," she said at last.

"Where is he?" asked the woman.

"Where is who?"

"My son."

"He has gone to the village to fetch a lady in his car; he will be back in a few minutes for we are picnicking here."

Lille stuck her arms akimbo, she had big bold breasts, and the red shawl was bound tightly round them. Her eyes were now fiery. "He loves you," she said.

"I think so."

She stood like that and went on talking; she spoke automatically as though the words were important to her, something she had got to say and the only thing was to get them out and have done with them.

"He is my son; in him something of me lives, and because of that I love him, and want the best for him. I did wrong to have that boy, I have other sons now, but I am most sorry for this one. He is a gentleman with my blood in him, and it is my blood that will not let him be."

"He is very happy," said Valére.

"Listen! He cannot be half gipsy and half gentleman; that is good for no one, and he is to be all gentleman; I have my gipsy sons, I have my gentleman son, I do not want the one in both. He should have married the other lady the one who looks like a flower, the fair lady, the pretty lady."

Valére stared at her helplessly. "You mean Miss Robins?"

"Yes. I mean the fair lady. There is something of me in you, you come from another world, from my world. You may not know it but far back in your world, my world rested too. It sounds strange and untrue, but it is true and it is not strange at all! Your world and my world are bound fast and you must set him free."

"Set Ivan free?"

The gipsy did not flicker; she still stood there with her arms akimbo and her flashing eyes staring at Valére.

"Yes. You know what this blood is, it is not faithful, it is roving. I cannot stay in one place all the time as my son must stay in one place, I could not live in a house, and my son must live in a house. I ran away from all this because I could not bear it. He *can* bear it because there is much of his father in him, and left here, he would be happy, and he would live as his father lived, and be as his father was. But there will be children. It is not right that your blood should mix with his, because then again the strain must tell. Those children will be like my children have been, they will not stay in one place all the time, they will not live in a house. They will not want walls which are shackles, and gates which are chains. They will want to wander, and for him and for his children that is not good."

"Why do you tell me this?" said Valére, "you have been a very bad mother, you deserted him, you ran away when he was only a baby. You can't pretend that you care for him."

The gipsy did not resent it; she never flickered. She was a

statue standing there saying her piece, but when she spoke her voice was warmly vibrant, and the story that she told had power behind it.

"I ran away because I was so unhappy; I had made a bad mistake, and I could not make all my life into one bad mistake. I knew that he could be happy, far happier than with me. I left him well cared for; he has always been well cared for. But you cannot destroy the thing you have made like that. When you bear a child, part of yourself goes into that child, and though you may try to tear it up and fling it aside, you cannot do that. I have come back. I have always been here to watch him to see that he was happy. And he was happy. This is the first time that unhappiness threatens him, this is the first time that I see danger ahead for him. Look. I have seen it here."

She thrust her hand down into the tattered bodice that she wore under the shawl, and drew out of it a round crystal ball. The crystal was warm from contact with her flesh, it was misted, but the mist clearing, it shone radiantly in the room as though attracting all the light.

"You see it there?"

"Yes, you must not marry him. Besides you are not free."

"How do you know?"

"It is here." She tapped the crystal again with a work-stained hand, small, but roughened by the weather. "I see your husband here, and he is good for you and you are good for him. But you must not marry Ivan. You love him I know, in my way I love him too, that is why I have risked all to come here to-day, that is why I have followed you. You would not be happy you two and your children would be unhappy. They are my grandchildren. You think because I left him I was cruel, it would have been crueller to have stayed; far, far crueller."

Out of the distance came the sound of a car.

"He is coming back," said Valère, suddenly afraid.

"He must not find me here, he must not know about me; I am going again."

"He is bound to see you."

She laughed at that. "Oh no," she said, "I come and go like the wind and the rain, and nobody knows about it. But you will know that I have been. I want my grandchildren to be happy. You know that too."

She walked silently to the far side of the room; she was like a ghost, for a moment it occurred to Valère that it might be a ghost, then she knew that it was nothing of the sort. Lillie went like a leaf wrapped in that old red shawl which had a semblance to the Virginian creeper in September, darkly red against the façade of some old house.

Then she had gone.

Valère did not know whether to be furious or indignant about it. It was of course the greatest nonsense; there was nothing of the gipsy in her own blood, nothing at all and the whole suggestion was an insult; she accepted it as being that. She dismissed it as that, and went out to meet Sylvia and Ivan. She would forget that she had ever seen his mother at all.

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It was the merriest picnic that they had had.

Sylvia had a gay mood and talked enchantingly. The food was good, Ivan had produced a bottle of wine, and the heat haze rising in the distance brought out a day that was warm and fine, with just enough breeze to prevent it from being distressingly hot. Ivan produced the little radio set out of the car, and when they had finished eating they sat listening.

They thought that he dozed, and whilst he sat a trifle aloof his cap tilted forward over his eyes, the girls talked.

"I love this place," said Sylvia, "it always reminds me of Ivan's mother; we know so little about her, nobody ever seems to talk of her, so it is all queer. She must have been a strange personality, and I can imagine what old Lord Burystone said when he heard that they were going to marry. He would have been furious."

Valère said nothing; the place was full of the atmosphere, reigned over by the picture at the far end, portrait of the girl with the vivid eyes and the dark lustrous hair, and the shawl like hawthorn leaves in autumn wrapped round her full upstanding breasts, and young poised body.

"The family took it very badly," said Sylvia speaking in a low voice. "I've always felt sorry for the daughter-in-law even if she was a gipsy, she wasn't a bad sort I am sure; she must have had some charm to recommend her, and by all accounts she was a wonderful gipsy; she saw things in the crystal."

Valère remembered a glass ball which the woman had drawn from under her shawl, a misted ball, misted from its contact with her body warm and alive. Valère would not forget it in a hurry; in it the gipsy had seen the future of her grandchildren and had been worried for them.

"It is said that she told the doctor that his son would be killed in the war, and the girl at the rectory that her lover would marry a Russian and never come back to her, and anyway it came true! At the time the doctor's son wasn't even called-up, he was a medical student and nobody thought that he would have to go, and the girl at the rectory had a lover working in a factory in the North, with no idea of ever going to Russia at all. Funny how those things work."

"Yes," said Valère, "and there is something of that mystic spirit about Ivan, something that walks with him and looks out through his eyes."

"I think he could tell fortunes if he tried."

"I wonder."

"I have often thought," said Sylvia slowly, "that the past shapes the future and that is why you can tell fortunes; after all how can you tell a future that has never been, unless it is a reflection of the past which has been?"

The past which has been! The past which had flittered into the garden of the Hall, a lovely dark beauty which had captured the fancy of an artist. The past which must not be again. Valère thought of Ivan, dark, with much of his father's vivid fancy, with much of his mother's virility and changeableness, and something untameable born of her eternally in his heart. "Perhaps that is it," she said.

They sat on talking. Sylvia told her of her own life, born in the house with the frequent windows, the parties at which she had met Ivan, the Christmas one where he caught fire, and she had been so worried for him. His riding accidents when he had first started hunting; always a dare-devil, he liked going about asking for trouble, and sometimes he found trouble. His journeys abroad.

"Did you know that he was nearly drowned in the Adriatic? He went out there with some old school friends, and there was a frightful accident; he would have been drowned if it hadn't been for one of his pals, who saved him."

"Yes, I know."

"I have never been to places like that," said Sylvia slowly. "Paris, Dresden, Switzerland for winter sports, all the scheduled things, but then my mother thought along scheduled lines. I would have loved wilder places, the sort of places that you know."

Then Valère told her a little. She had not thought that Sylvia, who had obviously lived only a sheltered life, would understand, but she did. They talked of Danzig in the old days, of Dubrovnik with the war drawing closer all the time, and of that dreadful voyage home listening to the creaking

of the sides of the tramp steamer rising and falling with the tides, and the other sounds, the distant sounds of U Boats, of guns and aeroplanes beating against the sky. A voyage from which Valère had believed she would never make land-fall, when she staggered ashore, she could only cry thankfully, her mouth parched, her eyes staring, her whole life it seemed utterly broken.

"I could not have borne it," said Sylvia, "you must have been very brave, but then I'm not a brave person. I just go on living comfortably, and believing that I am doing quite a lot in my own little way, but really I am doing so little that when I hear stories like yours it makes me ashamed."

"I think you work in your own sphere as I work in mine. That's all there is to it," said Valère, "and I am awfully glad that we have met. There is something about you that I appreciate. I do hope we will always be friends."

"I hope so too."

Then Ivan stirred himself, and they went in the car down to the shore and bathed through a hot sweet afternoon with the tide running in in little recurring waves, and the gulls wheeling about the cliffs. They came home at evening.

"We are starting back after tea," Ivan told his grandfather, "Valère has to be back at work in the morning, and it is easier travelling at night."

"You'll drive carefully?" The old man had the gravest suspicions of his grandson's driving.

"You bet, with such precious cargo," and he grinned.

Somehow Valère had disliked saying good-bye to Sylvia; she had taken a violent fancy to the girl, and she had an idea that they would never meet again. She had a horrid premonition that the curtain was falling on this little village, and once fallen, could never be lifted any more.

She went upstairs to fetch her things. Mrs. Bickerstaff was waiting with everything beautifully packed for her, and

standing with her hands folded on the small scalloped apron poised on her black silk-encased stomach.

"We are all sorry that you are leaving, miss."

"It's been a glorious week-end, something that I shall never forget."

"We hope you'll be coming back to see us," Mrs. Bickerstaff said it earnestly, and Valére knew that she really meant it. "It is pleasant to see Mr. Ivan so happy, and we all hope to see a great deal more of you, miss."

"I'll be coming back," she said.

But she had a morbid intuition that she wouldn't be back, that the curtain must fall, and once it fell she would never lift it.

"We want Mr. Ivan to be happy, really happy." Mrs. Bickerstaff loitered like some bright little bird, her eyes shining, obviously there was something that she wished to say. "We all want his happiness, which is very dear to us. His father was never happy, and the unhappiness made his lordship very miserable too. His lordship is an old gentleman now, and we do not want him to be distressed any more."

Valére stood looking at Mrs. Bickerstaff. She said, "Do you think I would be the right daughter-in-law for the house?"

"Oh yes, miss," and the beady bright eyes twinkled, "we all think that! We did think of Miss Sylvia of course, she was the person we all loved so much, but young gentlemen are young gentlemen all the world over, and perhaps having lived in the same village so long made it difficult. Most people fall in love with strangers when you come to think about it, don't they?"

"I don't know."

Valére knew that the moment was passing. She had longed to throw all her cards on the table and to ask for a decision. She was frightened about making up her own mind, frightened of doing the wrong thing. She wanted to tell Mrs. Bickerstaff

of that star of David which had risen upon her life, of her own ancestry, of her own background, the very background that the gipsy had questioned. And the gipsy had been right. She had thought of the children who would come, of the children whom she had seen in the misted crystal, and was afraid for them.

"Well, I must be going," said Valère suddenly shy.

She went down the stairs where Ivan and his grandfather were waiting in the hall, and old Biggs, looking skeleton clear like some old bronzed leaf from whose green beauty has withered, with every vein etched clearly, and every artery plain.

Poor old Biggs; he looked so frail that Valère could not believe that he would be here much longer; when she came again (if she came again) she could not think of him still standing waiting.

"You'll be back soon?" said Lord Burystone and he came out on to the top step to wave his stick at her in good-bye.

"Yes, soon! Of course I'll be back."

They were sitting side by side in the little car, it turned the corner, swept round the curve of green with the flowers in their stiff beds, across the bridge and through the iron lace gates of the parkland. A little old woman bobbed, Ivan waved his hand—the visit was over!

For a while Valère said nothing. She sat back looking at the lovely Somersetshire country speeding past them. The Quantocks, the green lanes arched as cloisters, the gardens brimming with lilacs and laburnums, the peonies pressing their fat red cheeks against country hedges in little gardens.

Then the mist descended, a purple haze which touched the distance tenderly, the haze of evening.

"Happy?" asked Ivan.

"Happy, but sad."

"Why sad?"

"I have the feeling that I shall never see the place again and I loved it so much."

"What an absurd feeling! You're going to live there; you are going to be mistress of it, and be terribly happy there. How could you think anything so foolish?"

"I don't know, I just did. I feel that the place is Sylvia's."

"I am sure that dear Sylvia (and mind you, she *is* a dear), would make the ideal mistress of the Hall in every way, but at the same time, I have other plans! I wonder why you've become so morbid."

She waited a moment until they had turned the four cross-roads, then she spoke again. "Go more slowly, Ivan, I want to talk to you. Have you ever seen your mother?"

"My mother? Good Heavens, why?"

"I just wondered."

"Do you know it's funny that you should ask that but I always had the feeling that she was watching over me. It was probably just a too-vivid imagination, but although I have never actually seen her, I have always got the impression that she was there, in some dim way."

"Yes, I know," and then very slowly, "Ivan, I saw her yesterday."

"You saw her? Good God!"

"She came to me in the cottage."

"You don't mean that she is hanging about that place? Heavens, how awful for you! She came to you."

"It wasn't awful, or difficult, or anything like that. She stepped inside the window without making a sound, just like I say, it was all very strange. She just came into the room and I knew at once who she was of course; we talked."

"What on earth were you talking about?"

"You, Ivan. In some strange way she cares for you, she cares enormously!"

"She must! A woman who clears off and deserts her baby must care enormously you'll be telling me next. I'm afraid that is one you can't put over."

Valère started again. "Listen Ivan, slow the car down so that we can talk. She has other sons, she said that she had gipsy sons and one gentleman son, and the two couldn't mix."

"If she is suggesting that I go out poaching with a rapscallion collection of gipsy sons, I'm with her every time. Of course they cannot mix."

"You don't understand. She is very anxious that you should be happy, and worried because she says there is much of her in you; in one way you have that gipsy streak, in one way," she hesitated a moment, "those who come after you will have that streak, and if they are to be happy they must not emphasise it."

"What on earth do you mean?"

He had stopped the car, running it into a little blind alley of a lane, a green cart track, overgrown with brambles and thorn bushes which had trespassed beyond their appointed ditches.

"She says that it is important that you should marry the right woman."

"You're telling me!"

"And I'm not the right woman."

He had his arms round her instantly. "Darling, what utter rubbish this all is, how can you have listened to such nonsense from an illiterate gipsy who doesn't even know what she is saying."

"But she does know, Ivan, she does know."

"I won't believe you. I'll close your mouth with my own; it's the only way to be sure of your silence."

It was a long sweet kiss, but it could only make matters more difficult! She loved him, she wanted him terribly; nobody else could mean so much in her life, she realised it,

and if she let him go she would always regret it. She didn't know what to do.

At last she spoke again. "Darling, I'm not of your nation or of your temperament. The Poles have a wild streak in them, they are a nomadic race in many ways. I have come so far that I know that wandering feeling, I know what it all stands for and it makes me afraid."

"But darling, that is what I love most in you."

His eyes were close to hers, dark as his mother's, and in them she saw the same wild brightness which is born of a gipsy encampment, which walks through the lanes on and out to the sea, and ever towards the far horizon. The vans that go swinging on little painted rickety wheels, yellow and red, the gipsies that stride through the dust of summer, or the snow of winter, and know no other anchorage save the van that moves for ever with them, and the far horizon which lures them on.

"Ivan, sometimes you look like a gipsy."

"Perhaps that is half my charm?" he kissed her again; it was the lingering demanding kiss of the man who knows what he wants and will get it.

"We're crazy, Ivan."

"No, we're not, we're sane. Just sane! The world is ours to take, and we are going to take it."

He kissed her again and again with the little blind alley of a green lane before them, a lane which she knew must have harboured countless passing gipsies, and even as she looked she saw on the grass verge, scattered and old, the burnt-out imprint of fire in a circle, a fire across which maybe some gipsy couple had been wed.

Instantly he followed the trend of her mind.

"Listen," he said and his voice was constrained, "that was how my father married my mother across the fire. His wrist was cut and so was hers, the blood mingling to make them

one in spirit. Your blood and mine shall mingle the same way to make us one also. Come my darling. There is no time but now. Come to the fire."

"But we are not gipsies, Ivan, and you are two thirds gentleman, it is quite wrong for you to go back into the past and indulge such ideas," but all the same the thought was a wild one. She was in the mood for such things, for the spirit of the green lane was of romance and of daring, and of wild life.

"It would be far more wrong for me to stifle them," he said, "I want you as my father wanted my mother to be wholly mine. Oh my sweet, my own own sweet, I love you so much that nothing can destroy that which I feel for you and which I shall go on feeling for ever and ever. This is our hour. If we miss it, we miss everything that life has to offer, and there will be twilight beyond. This is our time. Now, my sweet, now."

He had his hand upon her wrist, controlling. His other hand held the tiny pearl penknife, and he would have led her to the dark stain of a trodden out fire on the roadside. It was madness of course, a certain lovely craziness that for the moment she could not stifle. Half of her wanted to give herself to the man who although two thirds gentleman was wholly gipsy at heart whatever his mother might say to the contrary.

"Darling," she said, but limply.

Perhaps she had allowed this full fire of his love to grow too big for her, and now she was struggling to quench the unquenchable. She remembered a poem that she had learnt once as a child.

A little fire is quickly trodden out,
Which, being suffered, rivers cannot quench.

Too much of his mother ran through the veins of this young man, and until this moment she had not realised how much.

"Ivan, we can't."

"Why not? You and I are primitive creatures of a wild law. Why not take what the gods offer when they offer it. If we are married over the fire, if our blood mingles over the gipsy circle, we are as much married as man and wife in church. That is the law of the wild, you know."

"But I have a husband already."

"As though he counted. As though anything counted but now. Valère my own darling, this is our hour, don't delay and let fate rob us of it." He had her in his arms, and when he held her that way it seemed that she could not hold back. It would be a miracle marriage if he led her to the fire that once had been. Then suddenly she seemed to come to her senses; the fire was dead; it had been beaten out by the gipsies before they left, following their rickety vans down green lanes and on and on to the sea. They would come back as they always did, but it would be to light a new fire, and kindle a fresh flame; there was no miracle of marriage in the burnt out circle, however Ivan might choose to think that there was.

"We shall never get to London this way, Ivan."

"I don't want to get to London. I want to stay here with the trees above us, and the smell of the grass, and the feeling that it is home."

"But it isn't your home. What would your grandfather say to the idea?"

He shook his head. "He would never know, none would know and surely you realise that. This is meant for us, and now is our hour. I keep on saying that and you allow precious moments of that hour to trickle away."

"I want to get to London darling."

He held her again, inflexibly close. "I would like to stay here all night. I would like to hear the birds singing at dawn like a choir, they say it is the finest sound in all the world

and I can well believe it. Like a voluntary to our marriage, yours and mine."

"Darling, you're crazy. I'm married to someone else, besides that sort of thing is impossible."

"You're my kind of a woman. You're mine. Nothing can take you from me really, however you feel about it in your heart."

"What would Mr. Mollinson say if I didn't get back to the salon in time to-morrow?"

"We shall be back in time."

"If we stay here, we certainly shan't."

"Yes, we shall. We can travel up in the early light and make more speed because the roads will be so clear. My sweet, I love you so much and want you so desperately; surely you realise that? In life I have always learnt that there is only one moment, and it is now. This is our moment, here in this lane."

"No, it isn't. I must go home."

If she started weakening anything might happen. She disentangled herself from his arms, dismayed at the look in his eyes, and she drew her body away from his.

"Valère, you're being cold to me."

"No dear, one of us has got to stay sane."

A miracle marriage over a blackened out fire, which haunted her, she thrust it out of her mind.

"I was never saner."

"We have got to get to London to-night. I don't believe in impulses, back the car out of the lane, Ivan."

"Out of my life, you mean?"

"Please—for my sake?"

He backed the car slowly out of the lane, and she knew now that it had never been a blind alley at all, but a turning point in her own life. She had had to make a choice, and here, even though unaware of her complete choice, she had made it.

She looked back for a moment and a nightingale started to sing.

"I told you," said Ivan bitterly, "and you would not have it. I told you, and now you insist that we go onto London. It is not too late to go back."

It seemed as though at that moment she saw the figure of the gipsy in the old red shawl, with the misted crystal in her hand, pointing to it with her finger, as though in it she saw another picture, an important one.

Ivan was furious.

He accelerated and bit his underlip as they went their way. She knew that he was bitterly resentful of what she had said. Ivan wanted romance, he wanted all the froth from the heady cup of life but somehow she could not see him drinking down to the dregs. They sat there side by side, suddenly without a word to say to one another, and yet five minutes ago they had been in each other's arms, gloriously happy. Perhaps she had been a fool to miss the chance, to take what life offered her when it offered it, and not repine for it after. Perhaps for them the nightingale would never sing again, and the camp fire was utterly burnt out.

"Aren't we going rather fast, Ivan?"

"Yes, and why not? You didn't want to stay there, now you don't want to go so fast."

"It scares me a little; here inside me it scares me," she faltered.

"There's nothing to be scared of."

"Perhaps not."

The car went smoothly, but she realised when she looked at the speedometer the pace at which they were travelling. "Ivan, do slow down, you're behaving crazily!"

"What about you? It was a lovely night. A night made for love."

"I know."

He was losing speed, the car was going slower and she was thankful. He said reproachfully, "How much you miss by being afraid? Life is a nettle and if you don't grasp it tightly, it stings you. Didn't some great philosopher say that?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Darling, when you love the way that I love, it's difficult to be sane and sensible and wholly reasonable. I want you so much, and for always. I want to make to-night the most wonderful one in our lives. To take what it could give and all that it could give, then suddenly you turn prudish."

"Not really that, Ivan."

"It seemed like it to me, and it hurt." He accelerated again, the dusky hedges flitted by in streaks of drab green fading to purple of shadow, in the half light the road was uncertain and rather insecure. They came to the crossing, she saw it white in the starshine, like a kiss; she thought of it like a kiss, a cross at the end of a letter, only in white instead of black ink marks. Suddenly she heard a little scream (not recognizing it as being her own), the scream arrested half way stopped with a shock. She had seen the approaching car before Ivan did, for he was so busy with his own predicaments, and disappointment. Too late he jammed on the brakes; the car shuddered with the violence of sudden impact, and then it seemed to Valère that everything calmed down; the sounds stopped, they died away like an echo trailing into the distance, they didn't matter any more.

She smelt the strong, sweet scent of hay with sorrells and clovers in it. Stirring she found that her fall had been broken by a half made rick at the corner of a field. She raised herself on her elbow and saw the two cars in the roadway, the strange one smashed, with little splinters of glass gleaming in the light all over the road surface. Ivan's car, its front wheels up a bank, but apparently all right. How she had got there,

she did not know, but Ivan, unharmed, was kneeling beside her.

"Darling, my own darling, it was all my fault; my own desperate fault just because I was in such a vile temper. Darling, have I killed you?"

"I'm all right, Ivan," she pushed her hair out of her eyes, feeling most strangely bemused. For a moment she could not steady herself; there was a tendency to cry, a longing to sink back amongst the hay, a wondering as to what had happened all merged and terrified her. Then with a big effort she pulled herself together. "The other car, Ivan? Is not there somebody hurt?"

"I had to see to you first. Sure you're all right now?"

"Quite sure."

She swayed on to unsteady legs, the fact that she had risen brought a quick run of blood to her head, but she choked down the tendency to cry, and stepped forward. They went through the hedge together hand in hand, Ivan drawing her after him. In the roadway the glass gleamed ominously, and the car looked pathetically broken as it lay there. Someone was stirring within it. A man's hand was trying to open the door which was hopelessly jammed, a man's voice let out a good round oath. Whoever it was, he wasn't dead!

"Coming," called Ivan, and went to the rescue.

Valère, still feeling wistfully helpless, stood on the grass verge staring at them. The mess was considerable, it sprawled down the road in myriad pieces of sparkling glass, surely the man must be badly hurt and she hoped that she was not going to see some terrible sight, something that sickened her; just for the moment she had the feeling that she could not take much more, and did not want to make a scene. She had always had the greatest contempt for women who made scenes, and even when covering that dreadful journey in

the tramp steamer from Dubrovnik when the other women wept, and wailed, and deplored the fact that they were sure they would never make landfall, she had kept quiet! Now, on the top of the shock, she knew that if something terrible came into her life, she could not take it. She was scared.

The man crawled out of the wreckage holding on to Ivan's hand. He wasn't hurt, or apparently not much, he dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief which had a dark splash on it, otherwise he seemed to be all right. He was talking rather fast, shock probably, blaming Ivan who had been wholly to blame of course, and together they came to the verge. There was something that she recognised about the way that the man loped; she had seen him before! In bewilderment she clung to the impression of him, what had she seen, where had she seen him? And suddenly she had the impression of a night in Dubrovnik, of a man kissing her in that little room, a man who had every right to kiss her because he was her husband, and yet no right at all because he would never be her real husband.

It was Leo.

He won't know me, he won't recognise me, she thought, and she noticed the starlight on his blond head, so very much fairer in contrast to Ivan's dark one. But he did recognise her; he made no movement, she only knew that he had realised who it was.

"I'm terribly sorry about this," said Ivan.

"I should think you are, driving like the devil! That's a very dangerous crossing, look what you've done to my car and my head too. It'll want stitching up."

"I'll take you to the nearest doctor." Suddenly Ivan noticed something about him. Valère had been waiting for this; she had stood by watching it all, in the way one watches a film being enacted in front of one's eyes. "Here, I know

you," he said suddenly, "you're Leo, I'm Ivan Graham. The Old Christopherson. Dubrovnik. . . ."

"Good Lord!"

They stood in the roadway, with Valère swaying on the edge of the roadway; Leo had forgotten her presence because he was absorbed with meeting an old schoolfriend. The man whose life he had saved, and who had now done his best to kill him in return. Friendship must mean more to men, she thought suddenly, they always seem so far more pleased to meet one another than anyone would have anticipated. Queer. All so very very queer! Or, with a sudden flash of inspiration, have I been knocked on the head and am I dreaming all this? Leo couldn't possibly be here now, Leo could not have crashed into our car, none of this is possible, it is pure fairy-tale, and quite untrue.

Then she knew that it was true.

Leo had come across the road, he was standing there looking at her, holding out his left hand to take hers, for his right hand hung limply. "You're not hurt?" he said.

"No, I'm not hurt."

"I'm glad, I seem to have been the only one who has suffered a jar. I'm in rather a mess."

Mechanically she took out her own handkerchief and put it to his head. "We must get you to a doctor. Ivan, we must take him to a doctor; look at his wrist, it isn't hanging right."

Leo held it up. "No, it isn't right at all, is it? I believe there is a doc. way back in the village a mile along that road. If your car is in running condition, we'll try him."

Ivan had gone to his car and was fiddling with the gears; he was a strong young man and could move mountains, he was trying this and that, as he did so Valère turned to Leo. "I never thought to see you again."

"You got the earrings all right I see? I never used them."

"It was nice of you to send them back."

Leo said quickly, "Ivan Graham, what is he to you? You're engaged?"

"Not really, well, not yet anyway. How could I be?"

He shrugged his shoulders and the effort made him wince; she saw that the arm was hurting him badly, moreso than he would admit. "Leo, that's hurting you."

"Only a bit. I'm glad you are safe, glad you're happy; we must see what can be done about you but for the moment I must get this damned thing put right."

"Yes, yes of course."

"Does Ivan know about me?"

"Something, not all. He doesn't know that you are you, so to speak."

"Thank you, that was what I wanted to know most of all."

Ivan was calling to them from the roadway. "She'll make it. The first thing to do is to get you in to the doctor's and then send somebody back to clear up the mess here. Come along."

He had hold of the good arm, carefully, almost tenderly he shepherded Leo across the road to the car and helped him into it.

"There'll be room for Valère too."

"You'll drive slowly, Ivan?"

"Like a hearse."

He probably would for he must have had a severe shock himself and she knew it. Coincidence, the most extraordinary coincidence in all the world that this should have happened here and now. Suddenly she got the impression of that dark ring of the camp fire that was burnt out; she had the idea that the lane had been the actual crossroads in her life, not the subsequent crossroads where they had crashed.

The car started very slowly indeed; it made strange sounds, but her heart was making stranger ones as they jogged along to the village. The three of them sitting here in the one car,

three people whose lives were so fantastically interwoven, three people so involved with one another and yet she was the only one who knew the details. She.

She saw the village lying ahead of them.

"It's the first house, the long white one flush with the road; I noticed his plate as I came by," said Leo.

There was a cedar of Lebanon in the garden, a big cedar which spread dark branches in a maze against the sky as though the tree were cut out of velvet, and superimposed on the sky itself. The house was white with little windows, a lantern hung in the doorway, an old ship's lantern, reminding her of that other journey, that fateful one when she had set half Europe between herself and Leo, and now, so strangely they had met again.

The doctor himself came to the door; the only maid had apparently gone to bed; he was a man in the late fifties, with a bald cranium, and beetling brows from under which his grey eyes looked out kindly.

"It's an accident," said Ivan, "we had a bit of a smash at the crossroads, this chap's car is bust-up completely, and he seems to have had some small injuries, so I brought him along."

"Come inside," said the doctor.

He opened the door of his consulting-room, a country consulting-room, with a couch with chintz on it, and gay chintz curtains much like the ones that had fluttered at Valère's window in the big bedroom at the Hall. It was a kind little room and she liked it, but suddenly she felt desperately faint. It was reaction, she supposed, after all, enough had happened to-night to set her whole world awry. Too much!

"I'm sorry," she said limply and sank down into a chair, a wheelback chair that had been collected from some cottage where the doctor had visited, the atonement for a bad debt maybe. The world was spinning!

"Here, that's all right; just shock," said the doctor kindly and brought her some *sal volatile*. It tasted horrible but she took it down, making a wry face; it cleared her world. Now she could see more clearly, and knew what was happening. The doctor's face was kindly and smiling with good intent, Leo was very pale, Ivan flushed. It couldn't be true that the two men were here with her, the two men who meant so much in her life.

"Now you just sit quietly," said the doctor, "whilst I see to this other young man. Hello, you got a hit on the head, that'll want a stitch. Messy business, but not too painful, there is that about it."

"My wrist's not so good."

"Collis fracture, I should think." He eyed it casually, "do you live near here?"

"London, Lower Sloane Street."

"Married?"

There was never a flicker on Leo's face. "Yes," he said. Valère didn't know why, but the one word seemed to go deep into her heart. Husband and wife sitting here pretending that they were not husband and wife; surely it was the strangest predicament that had ever been!

"I'll telephone your wife, I think you'll have to stay here for the night."

"My wife is away from home."

His wife, and she WAS away from home, she was here sitting beside him!

"Let me know where I can get in touch with her?"

"Do you mean I shall have to stay here for some time?"

"No, certainly not, only that you'll have a foul headache in the morning, and that there ought to be somebody to see you home."

"My friend here will see me home."

"I thought he was the man who ran into you."

That was when Ivan spoke. "I did. I was coming along much too fast, I . . . I'd had a bit of an argument with my fiancée," (Leo looked at her for a moment) "and I was in a temper. The next thing I knew was that we had crashed. But he and I were at college together, we were chums, it's extraordinary, but we know one another. Maybe I can hire a car somewhere and get him home, my own car wouldn't make the distance, she grumbled enough about coming this far, but if I could hire something."

"Minter's garage down the road could possibly help you," said the doctor. He was selecting bandages from a drawer, laying them on the white enamelled table beside him.

"I'll fix that up."

"I suggest then," said the doctor, "that you and your fiancée wait in the next room, it's quite comfortable, and, you'd be happier then whilst I see to your friend. I shan't be long. Then we'll ring up the garage and see about getting you all home."

"Thank you."

Valère got up and followed the doctor through the hall to the little sitting-room beyond. It was a man's room panelled in linenfold, with old oak furniture and comfortable leather chairs. The doctor had been drinking some coffee and the tray was on the side. He indicated it. "There is still some in the percolater if you care to help yourselves; there are cups on the side too, I'll get back to your friend, I'll have to run over him, one has to after an accident like this, sometimes you find things." He nodded and went out again.

Valère sank down on the sofa. "What did he mean by 'find things'?"

"Oh, nothing much I should imagine. He seems a darned decent sort, we were lucky to strike him. The coffee is still quite hot. I think it was very good of him to think of us."

He brought her a cup and sat down beside her on the brown sofa with the bowl of delphiniums beside it. "Darling, I'm so terribly sorry about this, it was all my fault, entirely my fault. It was because I'd let myself go in that filthy temper, suppose I get that from my mamma. It isn't very funny really, and I feel horribly responsible for all this. Dreadfully responsible."

"I do hope he isn't hurt."

"Leo? Oh Leo'll be all right. He is the sort who can take a whack. He is the toughest individual I've ever met. Marvellous at Eton, and the way he hauled me out of the water at Dubrovnik . . ."

"He saved your life and you tried to kill him."

"My sweet, aren't you a bit hysterical? I mean, isn't that stretching a point somewhat? I didn't do it on purpose. I told you that green lane was something in our lives and you wouldn't believe me, you went on, you insisted on going on and I saw danger ahead."

"Don't say you have some of your mother's psychic powers?"

"No, of course not, and yet I wonder! I've never looked in a crystal, don't want to much, it would give me the jim-jams. Valère my sweet, don't be angry with me. You must be feeling awful and it is all my fault, but I'll get you home somehow, and safely, I promise you that."

"I think I'm scared to go in a car again."

"You shan't be, I promise." He put an arm round her cossetting her like a child. She did not know how long she sat there, grateful for the hot coffee, for the feeling of rest after strain, and of freedom from anxiety.

Eventually the doctor came back with Leo. "I've fixed him up, no real damage done, and no need for anxiety. His wife will never know save for the wrist."

"She'll probably accuse me of some drunken brawl,"

said Leo and grinned. It was the old schoolboy grin that Valére remembered all through, the same grin that had given her such immense courage that dreadful time in Dubrovnik, the time that she would never forget.

"Now," said the doctor, "I think if you'll come with me," (To Ivan) "I'll take you down to the garage. It's a bit difficult to find, and old Minter is a sour old customer at times, but I got him through a vile attack of lumbago last winter and can probably talk him into being decent about this. We'll see."

"Rather," said Ivan.

"You two rest, and don't exert yourselves, we'll get it all arranged," said the doctor; he pushed a silver cigarette box in their direction. "Shan't be long."

The door shut behind them.

CHAPTER VIII

THEY were sitting here in an entirely strange room, with the faint essence of smoke and flower perfume blending in the air, and the dark walls and the gay curtains. Husband and wife, who had never met since that morning when the ship had sailed, and she had been so dreadfully afraid.

"Well?" said Leo.

"Leo, isn't it a small world?"

"Yes, very small. I always say that is the most sickening part of it, the place isn't big enough for a man to live in peace."

"Meaning that for me?" She was on edge.

"Of course not, meaning that for my job. Lounging on beaches with all my creditors after me, I didn't find the world big enough."

"You never lounged on beaches. I know better now, for I saw your award in the paper, I found out a little."

"Even the highest authorities make mistakes, you know."

"Not about you, Leo."

"Don't they? Oh well, it was nothing anyway."

"Leo, I don't think I ever believed the beachcombing story, not after the first time. I always had the idea that there was something---well something rather tremendous behind it all. You were very kind to me."

"Nonsense, and you met your aunt in Swansea?"

"Never. I was never able to find her. I've never been able to trace anything about her. I've tried scores of times, but she seems to have disappeared."

He stubbed a cigarette against a crystal tray at his elbow.

"Valère, if you can bear it, I'll tell you the truth. The ship she was coming home in was torpedoed off Gib. I knew that when you were starting, only then I couldn't tell you. If I had done so, you would have stayed in Dubrovnik and there it was almost certain death for you."

"You knew?"

"Yes, I knew. We were losing stuff pretty heavily at that time, the ships were sinking all round us."

"Yet you let me travel by sea?"

"Because there was no other way; I wanted to give you a chance, it was the only chance that offered itself, I could not have done more, and I was terribly afraid for you."

"You thought about me after I had gone. Leo, you did think of me?"

"Yes, of course I thought of you. I used to go to the hotel quite often and talk to Serena about you. He died, you know."

"Mr. Serena died?"

"Yes, an explosion early the next year, just before I left. They suspected sabotage. I never found out the ins and outs of it, because I was transferred elsewhere. With patriot forces, on a rather tricky mission elsewhere," he grinned again.

"You must have been terribly brave, Leo."

"No, really I am rather a coward! I get dreadfully frightened at times."

"I don't believe you. And . . . and are you married?"

"I'm not a bigamist if that is what you mean, I have one wife, you ought to know who she is."

He oughtn't to say things like that, because they could only confuse her more, and make her more anxious. She sat silent for a moment, twisting her fingers in her lap and all the time he was watching her with rather amused grey eyes.

Then she said, "What are we going to do about all this, Leo, what on earth are we going to do?"

"It is now of course impossible for you to presume me dead. I am not particularly fond of divorce, and I presume that you want to marry Ivan, most girls do."

"What a very horrible thing to say."

"Not really. I've known him a number of years and a great many girls have wanted to marry him, but he has never wanted to marry any one of them. I know that. I think he does want to marry you; my job is to notice things and to notice people, and I think that he wants to marry you. The only decent thing I can do is to make the way clear for you."

"Leo, didn't you care for me at all?"

"I don't think this is the moment to discuss that, is it?" He was lighting yet another cigarette with meticulous care.

"That night, the night we were together I thought that you did care for me. I was very fond of you. I could not imagine destroying the memory of that night, because I believed it to be enduring. Now you are talking as though it never counted."

"I wanted you to live. I cared enough about you for that. My behaviour has been correct and I have done nothing to spoil our marriage, but it is quite obvious that now it has got to end. The best way is to apply for an annulment."

"An annulment?" Everything was happening too quickly, she could not think fast enough to cope with it, it worried her.

"Yes, I am afraid it is a tedious business, for the law is slow and lethargic and always a nuisance, but it does mean that in the end you'll be free."

"You want to set me free?"

There was the sound of the key in the door, they could hear the others coming into the outer hall. Leo got up, he

came over to where she was sitting, laying his uninjured hand on her shoulder. He bent over her for a moment kissing her brow. "When a man cares deeply, he wants to do the best for the object of his affection," he whispered, "Good-bye, dear heart."

No more.

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She was quite bewildered by the whole thing and did not know what she could do about it next. The doctor and Ivan came in with the news that they had knocked up old Minter and had got a young man to drive them to London for a price, (not that that mattered anyhow), the whole thing was settled. The bits of Leo's car would be collected and they had left Ivan's telephone number so that communication could be made with him.

They went out into the street where an old-fashioned bulging car was standing. It smelled frowsty, as though it had stood by for a long long time, and had only recently been brought into the daylight again. Its fittings were old and shabby but it had a certain degree of comfort. They put Leo into the back with a cushion from the doctor's house to support his arm, they put Valère beside him. Ivan went in front with the driver.

She had not wanted it to be arranged this way, she felt so extraordinary and dazed by the whole thing that the last thing that she wanted was to be left alone with Leo. More particularly now after he had spoken to her like that, and had kissed her, but she could not argue. The car started off slowly, and she had the impression of the light from the lantern reflected on the doctor's bald cranium as he stood in the doorway, of the little village where so much had happened in so short a time, suddenly receding, and everything changing.

It was a brilliant moonlight night; Valère felt that the nightingale might still be singing in that green lane, but not for her. During the last few hours the whole of her life had completely changed, and she knew it.

She sat very still; for a little while she was shatteringly nervous, believing that every crossroads they came to they would be bound to incur another accident. Then she pulled herself together a little. The man was driving with great care, and they were leaving the country behind them. Presently Leo turned.

"Seems queer to be driving like this, you and I?" he said.

"Very queer! The whole week-end has been queer, I can hardly believe that any of it happened."

"I am beginning to wonder if this happened."

"Leo, you knew where I lived, otherwise you could not have sent me back the earrings. Had you kept an eye on me?"

"No. I just happen to be in the same vicinity and saw you one day."

"And followed me?"

"Yes, I followed you."

"You might have spoken to me?"

"No, I always had the feeling that you and I were nothing more than ships which pass in the night." He spoke very slowly indeed.

Ships that pass in the night, and that was what she had thought Ivan was!

And passing hailed one another,
Then went their way.

Leo would be going his way again after this, and for some intangible reason she did not want him to go his way, but

to stay here with her. It was of course madness, because she could not have both of them and knew that she was in love with Ivan. Ivan was the more glamorous of the two; she would never forget the night when they had met and danced, and had talked afterwards so that she had become suddenly conscious of his compelling power, of the way that he could demand anything of her, force her to his will, control her completely so that she no longer had any will of her own. But Leo was gentler, Leo was her husband.

"I can't believe that we are ships that pass in the night," she said, "it was fate that made us all meet as we did this evening . . ."

"What a fate, and what a meeting," and he laughed. "I wish you'd light me a cigarette, it's a bit difficult with this wrist of mine."

"Of course, how thoughtless of me not to have done it before."

She lit the cigarette and set it between his lips. She had the feeling that perhaps he would try to kiss her fingers, but he did nothing at all, just accepting the cigarette with a muffled "thank-you". Looking out of the car window, she could see his profilè, it was a strong profile, she had the sudden recollection of the places this man must have been in, of the escapes he must have had, the difficulties, all the rest of his fascinating story.

"How did you ever get back to London yourself?" she asked him.

"Oh, I walked most of the way. Not difficult. Tramped it, you know. I'm used to that sort of thing and manage to survive it somehow or other."

"Do you?" He must be enormously strong. He must be the sort of man who could wriggle his way out of any hole.

"You carried your life in your hands?"

"Yes, always," he nodded, "but then life isn't much good unless you treat it that way. The people who value it most lose it the soonest; the people who take it like I do, hold on to it. I haven't deserved the luck I've had. I know that."

"I think you've been enormously plucky."

"I know I've been terribly afraid at times."

The car was slowing down for traffic lights. Ivan pushed back the small window which separated him and the chauffeur from the back seat. "Where do you want us to drop you?" he asked.

Leo named a little street not far from Shepherd's Market; now Valère knew how he must have seen her, for it was a street that she crossed almost every day of her life, on her way back from the salon. It must have been on one of those occasions when he had seen her there and had followed her home. But the street that Leo lived in, though small, was expensive. The flats there were exquisite as she knew, and the block they ultimately stopped before was one of the most luxurious.

"You'll be all right?" asked Ivan.

"Yes, I'll be all right. I have a man here who can see to me, and my own doc. lives in the next street. I'll be right as rain. Absolutely okay,"

"I'll come and see you in the morning," said Ivan.

"Nice of you."

"May I come one day?" asked Valère.

Leo looked at her, he was half in half out of the car; he smiled, and said "You have the right to come at any time you like, you know," and then he disappeared into the half light of the street.

When ultimately she got to her own flat, Valère felt too ill and tired to know what had happened. The flat was like an oasis in a desert, yet that desert had held its roses. The

weekend had been like a fairy story, it had been so unreal that as she lay down on the divan to snatch an hour's sleep, (which incidentally she did not get) she could hardly believe that any of it had happened.

She lay there with the early morning sounds of London coming up from the street below, with the light intensifying, and so illuminating the room as it drifted in through the drawn curtains, disturbing the leaves of the vine coiled around the iron balustrade. She was passing through a maze of dreams. Seeing again the cottage in Somersetshire where an artist had had that vividly sweet romance, and had painted the picture of the gipsy girl for the wall. Then the real gipsy herself who had come padding in at the open window, a leaf in the storm of living, a wind blown strange creature who in herself had seemed to be almost a ghost of some lost memory. She thought of the cave where she had undressed and the salty smell of the sea, as she and Ivan had raced down to the beach together, and the wind blowing his hair, dark and clinging to his head like a black satin cap, and the way that he had laughed. Sylvia, who had been so unexpectedly charming, and then the fantastic journey back. But the journey was horrible. As she thought of it, she could still feel the sudden force of the impact and hear her own scream dying away into that frightening silence, then the scent of hay from the little stack and waking to find that Leo was there.

Leo! She wondered how she really felt about Leo.

She wished that things had turned out differently, she wished that life had not run in this strange stream; it almost looked as though fate made the plans, and destiny darted a shuttle in and out of the loom of life, in a pattern from which there was no escaping.

If there had been just Leo, or just Ivan, but not both. Both made it impossible, because in different ways she cared

deeply for each; the debt of honour that she owed to Leo, the deep passion that she felt for Ivan swept her along with them.

She tried to doze but the confused pictures of the two men kept imprinting themselves on her mind. The noises of waking London became clearer, the light more dominant, and at last she got up and started to prepare herself for the day. She could not lie there any longer.

She would have to be back in the salon, where for the present moment the frocks failed to hold her interest. She had no idea how after all this she would go on with the ordinary pattern of living, and she had the feeling that she rebelled against it; she could not go on at her present rate. She wanted to go on living in the beauty of her romance, she yearned to be with Ivan and yet last night had been strangely disillusioning.

As she sat sipping her hot black coffee in the easy chair she could recall nothing but the green lane, which had proved to be a blind alley in her life. The symbol of the burnt out gipsy fire was one that she would never forget, Ivan's lips to hers, whispering masterfully, and the gleam of that tiny pearl-handled knife in his hand.

His mother had been right, something of the gipsy lay within him, much of the gipsy would appear if they married and had children, too much. But his was the romantic path and she knew it.

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Valère was out early in the street which smelled freshly of the new morning. She did not feel as tired now as once she had thought she would; it seemed that the coffee had quickened her, and barring a slight headache which she hoped would soon pass off she was quite bright. She went to the salon.

It seemed now to be an eternity since the last time that she had walked this street. As she turned in at the familiar door, a big old house with a fanciful fanlight sprawled graciously above it, she hesitated. The fanlight had always attracted her with its graceful line and leaded pattern.

Inside she saw Mitzi. Mitzi had been scribbling accounts at the ormolu bureau in the corner, sitting in a high backed Cromwellian chair, from which a length of apple green silk was sprawled indolently, in the manner of Mr. Mollinson who could make fabric live.

Mitzi looked up. "Oh 'ere you are."

"Where is everybody?"

Mitzi held up little fat hands to Heaven in horror; she goggled her sloe-like eyes.

"It ees always the same when there is a 'oliday. Everybody come back late or sick, sick or late. It is always zee same, it nevaire nevaire changes."

"Well, I'm here."

"You look sick."

"I'm well enough to report for duty anyhow, and that is all that matters. Did you have a good holiday?"

"My 'oliday was 'ell," said Mitzi explicitly.

"What happened?"

"No'zing. No'zing evaire 'appen to me, and that is the tragedy of being a woman and old. No'zing evaire 'appen to me."

"Where's Mr. Mollinson?"

Again Mitzi raised hands to Heaven. Mr. Mollinson had gone off sailing in one of the Essex estuaries, occasionally he went there in a friend's boat, sailing and living what they were pleased to call the very simple life. This week-end the brilliant weather had invited him out, with the result that he had overdone his sun burning, now he was almost flayed alive! He had felt very ill, and being Mr. Mollinson had made

the most of it, because he was one of those men who resented illness in any shape or form.

Worse had befallen him. Only last night he and his friend had gone out to the village club, a small fanciful place that called itself a yacht club imagining that it was being smart, and they had had a shell fish supper which had poisoned them. Mr. Mollinson had managed to get back to town, but was feeling far too sick and sorry for himself to do anything but stay put in his own flat, and there he would be obliged to stay for the rest of the day. He had crawled to the telephone to ring up Miss Rolphe that she must take over and make excuses for him. Miss Rolphe was delighted. There were moments when the whole salon became sick to death of Mr. Mollinson, for ever prinking in at one door, and pottering out at another, trying to ingratiate himself with customers who obviously laughed at him, but came because he was so good with clothes, or complaining that somebody had not treated him well and that he was bitterly hurt by their insults.

It looked like a good day as far as Miss Rolphe was concerned, with Mr. Mollinson held fast where he was, and the salon running far better and certainly much more easily without him.

It was not a busy morning; they had had several appointments, but with the fine hot weather lasting, half London had been unable to resist the temptation to stay where they were, not returning to town to keep tryst with hot streets and the smell of petrol and buses and tarmac.

This gave Valère the chance to recover.

She had only one job all through that morning, which was to show the little spot muslin frock and sell it to the enchanted mother of a gawky *débutante* who would look shocking in it. It was a sweet little frock, which reminded her of the Sunday best of the Dubrovnik peasants, a little frock with pin-point

scarlet spots, and a slotted sash with black velvet threaded through in the Edwardian manner. In the afternoon she showed the dark green moiré suit to a young peeress of the disdainful type, who had wandered in saying that she had nothing to wear and was sick of every rag that she possessed. The suit was slinky; it had pert pockets, and cried out for a coque feather toque to go with it. It would suit the young peeress who was a vivacious brunette.

In the late afternoon Valère telephoned to hear how Mr. Mollinson was, learnt that he was better, but could still eat nothing and felt limp as a rag. ("All that sickness my dear. Quite frightful! When it came to living or dying, I couldn't have cared less".)

With the salon closing, she decided that she would go to see Leo. First of all she told herself that it was only to enquire how he was, but in her heart she knew that this was not really so; she was going to see him because she could not keep away.

At the street corner a coster's barrow was selling lupins. They were tired with the heat, tall spikes of vivid pink and blue, shading to dark purple. There was something ethereal about their loveliness, and the blaze of colour that they made lying in the rickety little cart.

"Cheap to-day, Lady," said the coster pleasantly.

She hesitated. In that moment she was lost. It was absurd to take Leo flowers, in particular lupins, because they are never a man's flower, yet here she was with an armful of them, and the coster touching his cap at her, grinning amiably, and her heart beating a shade faster as she went down the street.

She crossed into the fashionable one where Leo lived. Maybe he would not want to see her after all. The hall was austere with its deep green carpet, off-white walls, and the sunray clock in gold sprawled indolently across the wall.

The lift was quiet, almost fawning as it took her to the second floor, and she saw Leo's door opposite to her, with the number twenty-one on it. Until this particular moment she hadn't realised what she was doing. She hadn't intended to cross the threshold, but she found herself as assuredly driven by fate as she had been sent from that green blind alley of a lane yesterday to the four cross roads where they had met. The bell shrilled.

She stood there with her lupins in her arms, and as she looked down she saw that on the carpet, here and there, were little knots of lupin buds in pale pink and pale blue, and deep purple, lying strangely like confetti from a wedding, her wedding.

A man servant answered the door, and she asked tentatively.

She heard Leo's voice calling from within: "Come in, Valère, I hoped you would come."

She crossed the little hall, smallish, and furnished with a single Chinese cabinet above which a hidden light glowed. She crossed into the sitting-room, a long L shaped room, with limed oak furniture, white walls, and scarlet cushions. An exquisite room, a room that immediately gave some vivid impression of the personality of the man who lived in it. From a white wall vase, an armful of green beech leaves offered shelter. Green, scarlet and off-white, and she saw the man sitting there with his arm in the sling, and his head bandaged.

"Leo?"

"Hello, I'm all right. A bit of a headache and the wrist throbbing. I suppose that's what they call knitting, and it will soon be better."

"What does your doctor say?"

"He says that it'll be fine."

"That's good."

He nodded and grinned at her again. "I wanted to see you, it was difficult yesterday, so sudden, so much happening, and everything unreal, but I wanted to discuss matters a little with you. You've had tea?"

"Yes."

"Bring some sherry in, Wilkinson, and then leave us. I don't want to be disturbed, take any telephone messages, and say I'm out."

"Very good, sir."

She stood there with her lupins, the wrong flowers for this room, oh, undoubtedly the wrong flowers, and she said helplessly: "I brought you these; they'll look awful in this room, but somehow I couldn't resist them when I saw them on the coster's cart."

"They're sweet! They used to grow wild at the end of the orchard when I was a very little boy in the Thames valley, and I've never forgotten them. I know they don't go with this room, but they'd look marvellous in the hall. Wilkinson will put them out for you."

She gave the bunch to Wilkinson and stood there, waiting until the sherry came, and they could talk. She stood on the white sheepskin rug before the mantelpiece, on it she saw a single photograph, a signed one of the King.

She drew back a little. She did not know why but the sight of that well-known face in this particular room suddenly stirred her strangely. It brought home to her with force the knowledge of the danger that Leo must have endured, of the hardships, of everything that he had done for his country, at a time when the country needed it most.

"I like that," she said slowly.

"I am prouder of that than of anything else that I possess."

"I don't wonder," she answered.

Wilkinson came back with a mirror-glass tray and the

sherry in a round amber bottle, the glasses with it. He set it down beside Leo. Then he went out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"Well," said Leo, "won't you sit down? You embarrass me by standing all the time, and I've got a lot to discuss about our future."

"Yes?"

She sat back in an off-white chair, surveying him, wondering what was in his mind.

"It was strange meeting again as we did last night, for sometimes I thought that perhaps I ought to have made myself known to you, and didn't. I thought if you wanted me you'd find me somehow."

"How could I?"

"I didn't think of that. I suppose in my job it is so easy to find out what you want to know. I imagine everybody else can do the same thing. I wondered if you liked the present arrangement; I realised that, of course, it was a state of uncertainty, now I know that you don't like matters as they are."

"Leo, please don't think badly of me." She could not bear it if he thought that of her. "It isn't that at all."

"You're in love with Ivan."

She wanted to deny it, and it was idiotic because she did not know why she wanted so much to say no, but she couldn't do so, not truthfully anyway. "Yes, yes I am," she admitted in a low voice.

"Ivan wants to marry you?"

"Yes."

"He knows that you are married, but does not know that I am your husband?"

She felt herself redden, and was annoyed to do so maddening and so school-girlish a thing. Leo wasn't her husband any more than she was his wife! A few words mumbled in

Dubrovnik might be sufficient to change a passport for her, but they had changed nothing in her personal life. She was still herself, and she still belonged to herself.

"No, he doesn't know."

"I suggest that we go through with proceedings and that he never knows. Ivan is a queer sort of a chap and it is on the cards that if he did know he might have scruples."

"Because you saved his life too?"

"He would put it that way; it is rather an exaggeration because if I hadn't saved him, somebody else most certainly would have done. He was in difficulties, and I got him out, only he has some extraordinarily quixotic ideas about it, and feels that he owes me a debt, which in reality he does not owe at all."

"I see."

"We just forge ahead with an annulment. I rang up my solicitor immediately this morning. The law is slow, I wish there were some means of hurrying it, but apparently there is nothing that we can do. I'll do my best, you know."

"But Leo, you are being almost too kind. I hate the thought that all this is happening, and you should efface yourself like this. After all, you were very very good to me."

"Now don't you start being quixotic."

"I owe you an immense debt, the greatest debt a girl could owe anyone."

"You paid with your jewels. Have you forgotten?"

"You returned the price."

"I found I had no use for it."

"Leo, at the time when we were married, that rather stuck in my throat; the jewels you know, I want to apologize for thinking of you as I did. I—I'm ashamed about it now, for it wasn't you at all."

"I wouldn't bother about that. It was what I wanted you

to think, I wanted everybody to think the same thing, otherwise my camouflage wouldn't have been too good."

"Only you were doing such a noble work."

"I don't know about that. It wasn't much really. I felt rather a cad that I couldn't see you through that journey home in that rotten little boat; I couldn't, you know, and it must have been one big hell of a journey."

"It was rather frightful," she admitted.

"You were jolly plucky to stick it and alone. I'm so sorry about your aunt, that was a terrible show, but then just at that time everything was terrible."

"Yes," she agreed, "everything was terrible." And she had the vivid remembrance of parting with him on that little quayside, of the sudden longing to go with him, come weal, come woe, to stay at any cost by his side, however great the price that she might have to pay for it.

He must have realised what she was feeling; for a moment she saw his eyes glance at her, a penetrating look, as if he saw more than he admitted, then he changed the subject quickly.

"I'm glad you met Ivan. He's a good chap."

"I rather thought you didn't feel that way."

"Oh, but I do, I always liked him. If I hadn't done do you suppose that I would have dived in after him that time? Not on your life, of course. But it would be useless for a jealous woman to marry him; all the girls fall for him in a big way."

"I've never been the jealous kind."

"They say that where there is no jealousy there is no love," he answered quietly, and again she had the impression that he glanced across at her as though hoping to read beneath the surface.

"I have always doubted the truth of that."

"I'm not here to argue. I only want your happiness, Valère, you know that?"

She sat with her arms linked round her knees; she felt strangely perturbed about him. "Leo, I wish you would tell me one thing, a thing I have never understood. Why did you marry me?"

"That's all over and done with now. I'm making frantic efforts to un-marry you, if a man may put it that way."

"But why did you marry me?" She leant forward watching him intently.

"Chivalry, I suppose. One hates the thought of a decent girl falling into that sort of misery. I suppose I knew my enemy fairly well, I knew that would make short shrift of you. I wanted to help you."

"Didn't you care for me at all?" she asked. "That time when you came to me and said 'I have always admired your earrings', was it only my earrings that you wanted? Seeing that you did not use them, it makes me wonder."

"No, perhaps it wasn't only your earrings; any respectable fellow hates to think of a girl left alone as you had been left."

"But not so far as marrying her."

"It was the only way that I could ensure you a passage home," he told her.

"Nothing more?"

He had inhaled the smoke from his cigarette, exhaling it again, so that it blew in a veil before his eyes, but again she had the feeling that he stared at her, startlingly penetrating, that he looked through her, before he replied. "Surely that was enough? I wanted you to be safe and to get to England. At that time marriage did not mean very much, candidly I thought there was precious little chance of my getting out alive myself."

"I see."

"I hope you don't think me ungracious. You asked for the truth."

"Last night, I thought . . ."

He interrupted her quite brusquely. "Last night I was slightly concussed. Concussed people do strange things; you cannot blame me to-day for my actions of last night."

"Perhaps I was wrong."

She felt humiliated, almost as if he had struck her. Last night she had felt that he cared for her, now suddenly she wished that she had not come here.

"Please don't take it that way": he was sitting smiling at her tolerantly, almost encouragingly, "it'll all come out in the wash, one of those things that happens. You'll marry Ivan and be terribly happy with him, anyway for a time."

"You think he is inconstant?"

"I think there is enough of the Latin strain in him to make him rather a difficult young man at times. But whilst it lasts, you'll be gloriously happy."

"Yes, I know that I shall be."

She got up. The interview was petering out in an unexpected manner, and she did not want to prolong it. Quietly she went across the room to shake hands with him.

"We'll let the case go on," he said, "it's the only thing, and I'll do everything in my power to hurry it up and see it through without Ivan knowing. He must never know."

"Why are you so certain of that?"

"Ivan has a queer sense of loyalty as I said, and I do want you both to be very very happy."

"We shall be."

She went across the room to the door, and out of it without looking back. One half of her was furiously indignant, the other half sheer miserable. In the hall Wilkinson was arranging the lupins in a tall vase, the floor was scattered with a blue and pink confetti of lost petals, and Valère realised that she ought never to have brought them here for they were dropping to pieces, like her affair with Leo. Until this moment she had thought that she cared for him. She had believed

that she owed him a debt, but she owed him nothing at all. She loved Ivan and she was going to marry him.

"Good afternoon, miss," said the man.

"Good afternoon," she answered glumly and went out into the street, with the scent of dying lupins in her nostrils. She did not know when she had felt more intensely miserable.

CHAPTER IX

THE everyday routine was back.

She got a letter within twelve hours from a firm of solicitors in the city, who acquainted her with the news that they had been employed by her husband to start the nullity suit and that they were proceeding with it. They would like to see her with regard to it and would she name a convenient hour.

She wrote back giving one.

She was angry when she wrote the letter, and yet did not know why; afterwards she was miserable.

To add to things Mr. Mollinson was in a thoroughly bad temper. Since Valère had come back from the Whitsuntide holiday, Ivan had not been hanging round the shop. The trouble was that he had suffered shock from the accident, quite unsuspected at the time but in consequence he had had to rest. Mr. Mollinson believed that Valère had, as he put it, "fluffed it", and the thought of a rich marriage escaping her clutches, horrified him. Mr. Mollinson had no patience with the people who were failures in life, he hated them.

"No girl can afford to play about with big chances," he told her, "and if you're wise you'll hold on to that young man."

"We are going to be married in the autumn." It would take all that time, even longer, to get the case through and she knew it. But she held on to the autumn with both hands, as being the time when they would retrace their steps down that blind alley of a green cart track, gone tawny and gold and flame with the beauty of October.

"Well, you take a tip from me, you will miss the boat if you don't watch your step."

"It's my own boat to miss."

"Tst. Tst. Tst," said Mr. Mollinson impatiently, "you silly girls always talk that way. Really I don't know what you're all coming to, but in ten years' time you'll regret it you know, and then it will be much too late."

She saw Ivan three evenings later. He sent her a spray of pink orchids spotted with cerise, in a tiny celophane case that was tied with silver.

Dine with me, was written on the heart-shaped tag.

That was all on a par with Ivan who always did things beautifully. He called for her in a big car, and she wore the dull silver suit, with the orchids pinned to the lapel. Her hair dead plain and the emerald and diamond earrings in her ears. No other jewels, just the earrings!

They did not go to one of the big restaurants, but to a small place that he knew of, wickedly expensive with a background of Venetian gondola and bridge, cupola and dome, and a soft string band, never too obvious, always content to remain as a background, no more. There were fashionable people sitting here, the faint bouquet of expensive wine, and of beautiful flowers, and of perfume from Paris.

Ivan had arranged a little alcove table where they could talk.

"Better?" she asked.

"Who would have thought the thing could have a back kick that way?"

"I would have done. I felt awfully weak-kneed for twenty-four hours."

"But then you got thrown over the hedge, I didn't. I thought I was okay and wasn't. I shall be more careful next time."

"There mustn't be a next time."

"No. I hope we'll be driving away on our honeymoon soon, and then I'll be very very careful. I've got an idea, we'll go back to that lane."

"I don't think one can ever go back in life, Ivan."

"Is it because you don't love me?"

"You know that isn't true. You know that I do love you, tremendously," she dropped her voice, "so much that I'm almost afraid for it. Perhaps love always makes you feel that way."

"I wonder, I know that I want to gather you up into my arms and sweep you right away. I can't go on like this much longer darling, when can you get rid of that silly husband of yours."

"Not before the autumn. It's to be a nullity suit and it'll take at least that time."

"It's too long, I can't wait." His dark eyes challenged her.

"Please, Ivan."

"I didn't say anything."

"No, but. . . ." He had the power to make her imagine all sorts of things, so that she dropped her own eyes before his, and became intent on stubbing out a cigarette in the crystal tray before her.

He changed the subject; he did it noticeably, and she knew that something was worrying him. "Sylvia's come to London," he said.

"Sylvia?"

"Yes, I thought that would startle you."

"It does, I thought she meant to stay in the country."

"She did, but she is up here in a nursing home; she hasn't been too well for sometime and the doctor wanted her under observation."

"Under observation? But she was perfectly well at the week-end? When she came to picnic with us at the cottage she seemed to be particularly well."

"Yes." He hesitated for a moment. "She has been through a bad time though, had a lot of strain and apparently her heart started giving trouble. The local doctor had seen it coming on some time, and he was most anxious that something should be done before she got worse."

"That sounds bad. Where is she?"

"In some home or other. I'll tell you in a minute." He felt in his pocket bringing out a sealskin case with a flexible gold rim, that rippled round the edge; he felt in the innermost crevice and produced a card. "Beaumont Street somewhere. I bet it's an awful place and that she hates it. I always think those nursing homes are the devil and cannot imagine why it is that people are so keen on them. Doctors must get a commission, the way they push their patients into them."

He handed Valère the card, and she read it, then put it inside the little suède handbag that she carried. "I'd like to go and see her the moment that I can. I wonder if she is allowed visitors?"

"You could ring up one of the sisters and ask. That would probably be the diplomatic move."

"Yes."

"And I," said Ivan slowly, lighting himself another cigarette, "must go round and see Leo. I've heard some most extraordinary stories about him, you know. When he told that country doctor that he was married, you could really have knocked me down with a feather so to speak. I never thought that old Leo was the marrying kind. Girls never appealed to him, he never looked at them. I could have sworn that he wasn't that kind of a chap. I suppose those espionage people ought to keep off it. Marriage can only be an additional encumbrance for their work, and it is terribly hard on the woman involved, wouldn't you think?"

"I wouldn't know," but a pulse was working hard in her throat. It was hard on the woman involved and she knew it, because she was the woman.

"I met Clarkson yesterday; he used to be in our form at Eton and he told me a lot about Leo."

"Clarkson?" she repeated the name aimlessly, and suddenly she wanted to hear what Clarkson had said. Anything about Leo would be interesting, she wanted to know more, she wanted to know everything there was to know. "Who is Clarkson? I've never heard of him," she said, hoping that Ivan would not notice that her hand was shaking.

"Clarkie is a funny sort of a chap; always knows a little about everything, yet nothing much in detail. I asked if he had seen Leo, and he said oh yes. Leo had been given a very high honour, and by jove, he had won it. He was out all along the Adriatic, carrying his life literally in his hands, cool as a cucumber and risking everything."

She said "Yes?" rather helplessly.

"Clarkie said that Leo got married when he was abroad. He married some Jewish girl for whom he felt sorry . . . nothing more. Leo isn't that sort of a fellow, as we all know; she would have fallen into the hands of the Nazis, and he shipped her home on a passport of the right species. He's never set eyes on her since, Clarkie swears. Funny, don't you think?"

"Most," and she prayed that it sounded natural, but doubted it.

"Rather like your husband?"

"Yes, isn't it."

"A damned decent thing to do, and when you come to think of it so like Leo. I don't know how Clarkie came to be in on it, save that he always knows scrappy little bits of every scandal. He says that Leo will never see her again of course, because shortly he'll be off again. Beachcombing,

or doing something for England. Well rather he than I. It would scare me stiff."

"It would terrify me."

"It's just his life, the kind of life a man cannot tear himself from once he starts."

"I suppose not."

Ivan pushed the liqueur away and said suddenly, "Let's dance." For a second it struck Valère that he had been pumping her, then she dismissed the suspicion. Men like Ivan didn't pump others; she got up, glad of something to occupy her and to distract his attention.

"Lovely," she said.

The band was playing a waltz, and the lights were lowered into a dim blue tender twilight of their own. There was the scent of expensive perfume that the women wore, and the soft sound of muted strings, and the knowledge that Ivan's cheek was close to hers; she could smell the brilliantine that he wore on his hair, American cloth hair she had called it once, and it shone in the half light. His arm was faster round her than it need have been, it held her close.

Like this there was no to-morrow, and had never been a yesterday. Everything that had gone before had no importance. Their meeting, the bathe on the coast of Somersetshire, and the cave that smelt of weed and wrack; the blind alley of a lane where there had been the blackened ring of some dead gipsy fire, over which he would have plighted his troth. The music of the moment made that memory sweet. Blood from their two wrists mingling together in a gipsy bond. But she had remembered Leo. And round the next corner stark reality had grinned knowingly at her.

They drifted on to the music hardly realising that their feet touched the ground, for they moved as one. There was dance after dance with no need for words, all that she asked was the feeling of his cheek against her own, and

occasionally his lips very near indeed. Through that unreal world they floated, and later (very much later) they drove round the park in the car, with the pink orchid crushed on the silver lapel of her coat, and the song of waking birds in the trees.

"The choir of birds! The dawn," he told her.

"Oh Ivan!"

"It would have been Heaven in that lane, where we should have been married."

"Only I was married already."

"It doesn't count; it could never count. He left you to come home alone, it wasn't a real marriage. Mine would be a real marriage, a marriage made fast. One day we'll go back to the lane and make it truly ours."

"I wonder," she said dreamily.

"Yes, we will, and all the birds of Heaven shall sing for us. Do you hear the lark? There are larks even in Hyde Park my sweet, though the world would not believe it. In that acacia tree there is a blackbird with a boxwood flute. But one day you shall hear it very differently, lying in my arms in a green lane, married to me."

They said good night on the step of the patisserie with the early morning scent of baking bread and crisp French rolls coming out to them from below her windows.

"Don't keep me waiting too long, my own own sweet?" he implored her.

"I won't, Ivan."

"I want you so much. I have got to have you for my own before many moons pass."

"You shall," she promised him.

"And then?" he asked her.

"Yes, and then," she said.

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Valère tormented herself about Leo and the Jewish woman he had married. What had he told the man called Clarkie? Was it true that the whole thing had been just to save her from the horror that swept across Europe? Now she knew that all along she had been hoping that there was more to it than that and that Leo had loved her a little. At the time she had been sure that he cared for her. Now, she wasn't so sure.

She and Ivan had meant to spend the afternoon of the Saturday on the river, but when she got to the Salon on Saturday morning he rang up almost immediately.

"For you," said Mitzi.

Mitzi was in a bad mood; her new corsets hurt her. Mitzi put more inside her corsets than she would admit, with the result that the wretched things squeezed her. She wanted to be squeezed because she would have given everything that she possessed to look slim and young, and nothing in this world would make this little pudding of a woman look slim and young.

"Who is it?"

Mitzi shrugged indifferent shoulders, too highly padded. "im," she said. "*Mon Dieu*."

It was Ivan. He had received a telephone message from Biggs. His grandfather had been troubled about some land that he was selling, and had this afternoon arranged to meet several old fossils of legal gentlemen in consultation. He was in a bad temper, and last night had suffered a fall which had made old Biggs very anxious. Biggs thought it all wrong for the old man to be so worried, and he implored Mr. Ivan to come down if he possibly could.

"I ought to go, darling."

"Of course you ought. It is the only thing that you can do."

"Only we had fixed something very different."

She said with truth. "There are so many week-ends ahead

for us, and there can only be a few for your grandfather. It's all his."

"Valère you're wonderful."

"I'm humane, I hope."

"I'll be back to-morrow."

"Don't come scampering back for me. I should hate to think that you were running into further accidents because you wanted to get back quickly."

"I'll be very careful."

"Thank you," and then just as she had been going to ring off, "Ivan, when you pass that green lane, salute it for me, please. Give it a kiss from me."

Then she hung up.

Mitzi was presiding at her desk, doing something to her overdone nails with a too long emery board. She had heard and mistrusted what she had heard.

Valère said, "It's a lane we passed the other night."

"So. I am glad that you passed 'im," said Mitzi who obviously thought otherwise in her heart.

"Yes."

"Now that 'as spoilt your week-end. Men! Ugh, how I 'ates them."

"It's all right. Gives me a chance to get my stockings darned."

"Zat will be so sholly," said Mitzi, "why not viseet zee seeck friend?"

"An idea," said Valère. "I will."

She rang up the Nursing home from the Salon just before they drew the dust sheets across its face. She was told by a pleasant sounding sister that visitors were encouraged because they cheered the patient up, and as long as she did not stay too long, they would be very pleased to see her.

When she had finished her lunch Valère walked up Bond Street, and across Wimpole to Beaumont Street. It was

a fresh afternoon, with a cool wind blowing which had dispersed the heat of the last few days and was very pleasant.

The Nursing home was one of the smaller ones with lattice windows which gave it quite a countrified air, and a pleasant portico. Inside the hall there was a nurse who was charming, and nothing like as austere as Valère had anticipated. She went into the ground floor room, where Sylvia was lying, and which looked out on to a little paved garden with a sundial in the centre.

Sylvia was deathly pale. "Lovely of you to come," she said. "My heart suddenly konked."

She was ready to tell what had happened. She had worn herself out in nursing her mother. Life had not gone very well for Sylvia. She did not say anything but Valère knew that she was thinking of the heartache and the unhappiness about Ivan. Loving Ivan was something that Sylvia could not uproot from her heart; she could not overcome it, it was with her and it stayed with her. For a little while she skirted round the edge of what had happened, Valère gathering that she did not get on with her mother, (a woman who looks like a horse, and behaves like one, Ivan had once said, and possibly with truth). She was the dogmatic type and should have been born a man, and she had set her heart on Sylvia making a successful marriage. The fact that the plans had gone astray had caused a rupture between her and her mother, a breach that was very difficult to cross.

"Oh dear," said Valère slowly, "isn't life difficult?"

"It's sometimes quite horrible." Sylvia was sitting up in bed with a tea tray before her, pouring out for the two of them. A fresh-faced nurse had brought in the meal without being asked. There was something cosy and comfortable about it.

"I sometimes wonder if we were meant to suffer in the way we are doing," said Valère.

"You too?"

"Yes." She had needed a woman confidante, and she had the feeling that she could trust Sylvia. "You see to escape from Dubrovnik, I married an Englishman."

"You're married?" Sylvia turned an astonished face to her.

"It isn't the sort of marriage that you would ever countenance. We were out there, and I married him for a passport; at that time hundreds of Jewish women did the same thing. It was my only chance of life, and he gave it to me. There was nothing more to the marriage than a ceremony out there and the passport with my name (which had become his) upon it. Then I came home."

"And he was killed?"

"No, he was not killed."

Sylvia said. "I don't want to appear curious, because Heaven knows I'm never that, I want only to help you. Perhaps I could help you. What does Ivan say to it?"

"I have a nullity suit going through. At first I hated the idea; I felt some kind of loyalty to the man who had given me my life, because that was what it amounted to. Leo did give me my life when he married me."

"Leo? That is an unusual name. It was the name of the man who saved Ivan *that time when he got into bathing difficulties in Dubrovnik.*"

Before she could stop herself, Valère had said "It was the same man."

"The same man?"

"Yes, Leo was there on espionage work; I did not know it, neither did Ivan. All the world thought him just a beach-comber, that was what he wanted them to think. Ivan knew little about him really, he has no idea that he married me, to him it is what the courts would call 'an unknown person'."

"I see. Ivan has the greatest respect for Leo; he thinks of Leo as some kind of a hero."

"Yes. Yes, I know. To me also. I shall never forget what he did for me, nor what happened that night. Then when we were motoring up to town from the week-end, we had a smash and we ran into his car. The world is very small, isn't it?"

"Good Heavens!" She saw the colour coming into Sylvia's cheeks as with intense interest she looked at Valère.

"That's all."

"And now?"

"Now I don't quite know what is going to happen, nor where I am. I care for Leo, I adore Ivan. That's all."

"And Leo behaved marvellously to you?"

"Yes." Her tongue became unloosened and she was able to speak of the horrors of that night. Even bombed London could have little idea of the terror of invasion coming closer and closer, of the encroaching hordes, and the massacres, the smell of blood spilled for nothing, and of torment in their wake. People shrink from horror, they have little appetite for it, and they try to forget, but once a woman has lived through the dismay of running before such terror, she never forgets.

"You feel that you are tied to him," said Sylvia, "I suppose that I should feel very much the same. You adore Ivan because he is one of those men that all women cannot help but adore. I know how it is."

"Leo said that."

Sylvia said very slowly, and her voice sounded to be weary. "Sometimes I wonder if what most women feel for Ivan can be really lasting? I'm different, well, I suppose each of them think they are different, but I have cared for him since he was a little boy, in many ways there is a maternal streak in it. I know that whatever he does, I shall go on

caring because mine isn't the passionate type of love which so often gets itself badly hurt."

"Yet loving Ivan HAS hurt you?" said Valère. In her own mind she believed that caring so much for him had crocked Sylvia's heart, and that her mother's illness was a very secondary cause.

"Yes, it has hurt me. But never so deeply as it would have hurt you, because you care for him in that other way, the passionate and sensitive way."

It was quite true.

"Oh Sylvia, I wish so much that I knew my own mind. When I was down in Somersetshire the other week-end, that very day that you came to the cottage, Ivan's mother came there first. We talked, it is no good asking me how, it was one of those things that just happened. She had wanted him to marry you, because she said that you teemed with that heritage which, for his happiness, it was necessary to foster in Ivan. She knew that there was a strong streak of herself in him, there is, you know, but she said that his happiness would not lie that way. She knew that I was a foreigner, recognising in me something that might easily be half gipsy too, and she thought that the same streak in both of us might lead to unhappiness."

"I think maybe she was right there."

"Maybe, but truly I don't know. I'm bewildered and just a little frightened by it all. Too much seems to have happened in my life recently, and it has given me the feeling of being very insecure."

"I don't see why. Whatever happens you can do nothing until the nullity suit is proved one way or another."

"It can only be the one way."

"Yes, yes of course," said Sylvia but her voice sounded tired.

The little nurse came in; she had obviously been waiting

outside with a stop watch in her hand. "I'm afraid that the patient mustn't tire herself too much," she said very gently.

"I'm just going."

The nurse, looking relieved popped out again to facilitate their adieux. She was a young girl with quite a childish little face under the stiff white cap. For a moment Valère wondered what had induced her to take up this kind of life which entailed so much personal sacrifice.

"She's very nice you know," said Sylvia, and then "You're going with Ivan to the Ball at Dorchester House next week, aren't you?"

"He hasn't mentioned it."

"But he is expecting you to go with him."

For weeks past bills of the Ball at Dorchester House had fluttered from every fashionable hotel. "It's fancy dress, isn't it?" said Valère, "and that always means so much extra in dressing up for it."

"Couldn't you go as a Polish peasant?"

"Perhaps." Valère gathered up bag and gloves. "I'll come and see you again, Sylvia, it has been very nice talking to you, you're such an understanding person. Do you know, I'm quite grateful to you for being such a dear."

"I'm grateful to you, Valère. Do come again. It gets a little lonesome lying in bed here with nothing to do, and the Sister tells me that I shall be here for three weeks. It might just as well be three years for the enormous amount of time it seems to me to be."

"I'll come back."

"Ivan is nice about coming when he is in London; he has two invalids on his hands at the moment. Me and Leo."

"Yes."

"Aren't you afraid that something might leak out?"

"No. Leo is the soul of discretion or he wouldn't be in the job he is in." Then Valère walked to the door, for the little

nurse was on the hover again, obviously very anxious to be rid of the visitor. From the door itself Valère waved good-bye to Sylvia, then stepped across the hall and out into the street beyond.

The day had suddenly grown very hot.

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Ivan had not expected that he would be delayed at the Hall, but there were long arguments, the old gentleman becoming very obstinate, and refusing to be hustled, and alarming the lawyers. What was worse was that he had alarmed his doctor. He had had a nasty fall, vertigo he said, and old Biggs questioned whether it might not be something more. The doctor asked Ivan to stay for a few days. He wanted to watch the old man and get him through the wood.

"All right," said Ivan.

He rang up Mollinsons daily. Mr. Mollinson knew his voice and was delighted at the thought, for the hotter and stronger the procedure of the affair, the closer was the wedding order and the trousseau and everything that would help Mr. Mollinson personally very considerably.

"Here he is again," he would say handing Valère the telephone receiver. "Tst. Tst. Tst. What a thing it is to be in love."

Mitzi gave it the hallmark of her disapproval. She scowled over the bureau.

Two days later Mr. Mollinson found out about the invitation to the Ball at the Dorchester. Valère happened to be out when Ivan rang up. She had gone to see a querulous peeress about a dance frock that had apparently made her look too scraggy. What had really happened was that she had gone out and one of the fellow guests had insulted her. The querulous peeress was looking for someone to whom

to attach the blame, and in her search found Mollinsons Ltd.

"Go and settle it for me Valère, there is a pet," urged little Mr. Mollinson who was not a brave man, "if I send Mitzi she will be rude, now nobody could ever think that my little Valère was rude. Always so perfect."

"But what shall I say."

"Tell her that she is an old hen and that she looks like an old hen and the best designer in the world could not make her look anything but an old hen, because that is what she is. OLD HEN."

"That would put the fat in the fire, I must say."

"I don't care." But he did care or he would not have been sending Valère and she knew it.

She had not gone five minutes before Ivan rang up, and recognising his voice, Mr. Mollinson began in honeyed terms.

"I am so sorry, so very very sorry, but she has just gone out on an urgent message for me."

"I had an urgent message for her."

"If you give it to me, you may rest assured that the second she enters the salon then she shall have it," said Mr. Mollinson all ears for any little tit-bit of gossip that he could pick up.

"She knows that she is coming to the Ball at Dorchester House I suppose?"

"I wouldn't know," said Mr. Mollinson.

"Well you tell her. I shall be back for it all right, perdition would not keep me from it."

"I will tell her."

"And mind she gets a suitable dress for it."

"But of course," said Mr. Mollinson smirking to himself.

Mitzi knew that he was delighted; he never smirked like that for nothing.

"So vat?" she asked as he hung up.

"I couldn't be more pleased," said silly little Mr. Mollinson, rubbing his hands together.

"*Mon Dieu.*"

The moment that Valère did return after a stormy interview with the querulous peeress who had been very querulous indeed, in fact Valère had been thankful to get away from her, Mr. Mollinson told her what had happened.

"He rang up."

"He? Who?"

"Why, you know. Oh, you'll be a peeress yourself one of these days. Undoubtedly the old gentleman has had a stroke and once they have one of those, another one comes along before you can say Jack Robinson."

"Aren't you jumping at conclusions?"

"I wouldn't have thought so. Everybody knows that is true. Oh no, you'll be a peeress all right. He wants you to go to the Ball at Dorchester House."

"I don't think I want to go." She didn't know why she held back but she did.

Mr. Mollinson looked to be defeated. "Oh, but that is bosh," he said, "pure bosh! It is always a good thing to be seen about at the right place in the right society and this is one of the biggest charity balls of the season. Everybody will be there and of course you will go if only for my sake."

"I'm not anxious to wear fancy dress. It is such a nuisance."

"I will arrange all that. What do you intend to go as?"

"If I had gone as anything I would have chosen to be a Polish peasant."

She had played with the idea that had been Sylvia's, and had to admit that it had a certain fascination for her.

"Yes." He looked at her appreciatively. "Yes, that should suit you, yet isn't it a little ordinary, rather dull on the whole?"

Mitzi looked round from her desk where she was scratching away with a huge orange quill pen. "What about of your oh so-vairy original ideas?" she asked. "A columbine, the fairy Queen? Something nobody has ever done before, hein?"

Mr. Mollinson paid no attention to her; he stared in rapt admiration at Valère; suddenly he had an idea. "I have it. The bridal dress of the Polish peasant on her great day. I couldn't have thought of anything more brilliant. The crown. The embroidered robe. Yes, now that would be perfect and you would look radiantly lovely, Valère. That is what you must represent and I can arrange the whole thing for you."

"But it is too flamboyant a dress."

"Nonsense, you would look marvellous in it. A bride of the country."

"Please . . ."

But Mr. Mollinson was a very obstinate little man and experience ought to have taught her that it was futile to try argument with him. He now let the inspiration of a good idea run away with him, and nothing in this world would change him.

Now he went over to the telephone getting in touch with a firm whom he believed could help him.

"There he goes," said Mitzi, "Now see vat you 'af done."

"I hate fancy dress."

"'E loves it. Anything to show off his work. You'll see, he vill make it all for you."

And she was right.

Work in the dressmaking salon was stopped hurriedly and thrust aside so that a really beautiful peasant's marriage frock should be wrought there for Valère to wear almost immediately. Mr. Mollinson superintended the making himself; the frock was of gold and white, with full gauze

sleeves, and heavy embroidery in sprays of pink roses on the bodice. It was a magnificent dress, and one over which he had spared no money. Before Valère really understood what was afoot, it was arranged to be delivered at her flat hers to wear for the evening.

Because she was at a loose end, and did not feel that she was good company or herself she went that very evening to see Sylvia again. It was queer that she should be so attracted to Sylvia, who at one time she would have thought to be her rival. Anything less like a rival was unthinkable. Sylvia's excitement at seeing her was unmistakeable. She had had a couple of dull days, though she was really better, her colour had changed, and her eyes were not so tired.

"In fact I'm to be allowed to do some needlework and Ivan is bringing it up to-morrow morning when he comes in the car," she said.

"Oh yes, of course." Valère had forgotten that it was to-morrow evening. Lately all the dates seemed to have got mixed, she didn't know why. "We are dining together to-morrow evening."

"Yes, and I'm glad." Sylvia put out a hand. "Ivan cares for you Valère. Be good to him. He has deeper qualities than you realise, you know. He gives many people the impression that he is an airy-fairy butterfly sort of person; he isn't really."

"I know."

"He is such a dear," said Sylvia deeply, and her voice was resonant.

"The strange thing is that you are a darling too. Before I ever knew you I thought you would be austere and aloof, one of those reserved people, and in truth you are nothing of the sort. You're *charming*. Just a wonderful person."

"I wouldn't say that."

"No, but I would."

"I've always thought that I was rather dull. I suppose that the sterling qualities are never very glamorous; in the modern world it is glamour that counts."

"That's a thing I'm not so sure about," said Valère. Working in Mr. Mollinson's salon there came a time when glamour jaded. There everything concentrated on it; brilliance, successful clothes emphasising certain points. But when she looked at Sylvia she knew that she had in herself those qualities that mattered. Valère was not sure but that Ivan had missed a very good wife. Some man would be lucky when he chose Sylvia.

"I'm going home in another ten days," said Sylvia, "not much point in staying on here; rest is what I need they say, and I can get that at home."

"Yes, of course."

The visit was cut short, because the specialist arrived on an unexpected visit. He was one of those large handsome men, doted on by the nurses, and he had developed to a nicety this little habit of arriving when one would have thought that any reasonable man would have had business elsewhere.

His arrival was much like the sudden appearance of God in their midst, for the whole nursing home pivoted round him, and the nurses got into a flutter.

Valère went home.

As she walked along the hot streets not hurrying herself, for after all there was plenty of time, she skirted the park. It was emptying, for the hour for a meal was at hand. On a seat near to her, half screened by trees, and flowering shrubs, she saw a fat little woman sitting, and there was something about her appearance that struck a note of recognition. The fat little woman wore French clothes, and she was talking to a rather threadbare man of about her own age. The man was not smart, but he was chattering earnestly,

and the little woman had an attitude of the greatest attention as though everything depended on the words that he used.

It was Mitzi, and she did not see Valère passing.

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The following evening Valère dined with Ivan. There had been a heavy thunder storm in the morning, and everyone prophesied that the marvellous run of good weather would now be breaking, the rain had come down in torrents, flooding the streets, but with the late afternoon the sun had dazzled forth again, and the evening was hotter than ever.

They drove into Soho, Ivan had a passion for little restaurants, he liked aromatic food, and the faint tang of garlic which lingered about the place. Dark-eyed children played in the streets, there was a general air of friendliness and the will to live. But Ivan himself seemed harassed. Valère noticed it the moment that she saw him waiting for her in her room. She was quickly responsive to atmospheres, and she knew immediately that something had changed him.

He was worried about his grandfather she told herself, the poor old man had had a nasty fall and the doctor had not been optimistic. Ivan cared deeply for his grandfather, and was very anxious on his behalf. She said nothing, but noticed that he wasn't talking as gaily, that his brow was knotted with perplexity and that he seemed to have lost the careless manner, and to be *distract*.

"You saw my lane?" she asked.

"Yes, I saw the lane."

"I hope you saluted it for me?"

"I waved it farewell."

He sounded quite morbid as he said it, very different from the man who had been so amorously in earnest about the significance of it.

"That sounds miserable. We are going back there one of these days?"

"Are we?"

They had a very good meal, and the restaurant was not too crowded, with its little tables down either side of the wall, giving the impression of a dining car on a train, with the pictures of quaint Czecho-Slovakian costumes, and the big trolleys of food pushed up and down. She tried to warm him but somehow or other, Ivan was absent-minded, and "away".

"What's the matter?" she asked when the coffee was set on the table in its earthenware containers, and the waiter withdrew again to where he was serving rum Baba on big spurious silver dishes with lashings of cream.

"Nothing is the matter. Whatever gave you the idea that something was?"

"You seemed to be so different."

"Oh no, nothing is the matter, and I am not different." Mechanically he produced his gold cigarette case and taking out a cigarette lit it, but very slowly; much more slowly than he usually did anything. "I've had rather a hard week with the old man, you know; he isn't fit."

"What's the matter?"

"There is some question as to whether that fall was a slight stroke or not."

Memories of Mr. Mollinson danced into Valère's vision. She wished that Ivan hadn't said that, it gave her a very unhappy feeling.

"I'm sorry."

"Not only that, and goodness knows that has been worry enough, because he won't take care, and nothing in this world will make him rest so that it is a big responsibility for old Biggs and for Mrs. Bickerstaffe. Not only that but there was a lot of business with his solicitor, and he can be very obstinate about such matters."

"I thought he was a kind old man. I cannot imagine him putting his foot down and being difficult about anything of that kind."

"Oh, but he can! He is as hard as nails at times, and even when he knows that he is in the wrong, he won't be advised." He sat there smoking, but not looking at her, and she had an idea that he was talking like this, just making conversation because he wanted to keep something from her. But what could it be that distressed him? For a second it occurred to her that there might have been some trouble at home about herself. Supposing that the old man, thinking it over, had suddenly raised objections? Supposing that there had been a long week of argument on her score.

"He wasn't angry about me?"

"No, of course not. He likes you. Of course he had wanted me to marry Sylvia, that was only to be expected, but he was awfully good about the whole thing. He wants my happiness you know."

"Yes, I thought that he liked me, but wondered if, well, if he had thought it over he had changed his mind?"

"No. He was perfectly friendly on that subject, it was just that business worries him. I think that he was born allergic to the legal profession, thinking they are always trying to do him and in that he's probably right."

"Quite probably."

Again the silence, an ominous one, in which there was no echo of unspoken thought; again she had the feeling that during the week something, a brick wall, a prison wall, or a high hill had risen between herself and Ivan. She waited until she could bear it no more, then she touched his hand.

"Ivan dearest, do tell me what is the matter? I cannot bear things to be like this."

"Nothing is the matter. You are imagining it. I'm a bit

tired perhaps, I've had a rushing day and I went to see Sylvia this evening."

"She's better."

"Yes, much better. She had a rotten time with that mother of hers, a woman who is a martinet. She ought to have died years ago."

"She's going home next week she says."

"Yes, I've got to slip down to see Grandpa again, the doctor wanted it, and I've offered to take Sylvia down in my car."

"You'll have to be careful. Remember what happened the last time you took a girl home in your car."

The strange thing was that he did not laugh, his voice had suddenly gone deadly serious. "I'm not likely to forget that," he said very slowly indeed.

"Ivan, don't be foolish. I was only laughing."

"I wasn't."

"You've changed," she said suddenly. Now she knew that unless she could thrust this brick wall aside, unless she could tear it down, she might never see the real Ivan again. "You refuse to tell me what has happened, but it is only too obvious that something has happened. Why is it that you won't tell me?"

"You've got to trust me, Valère. I admit that there is something. I am keeping something from you but then it isn't my own personal secret. I'd tell you, darling, if I could, but I can't, and you have got to trust me."

That made matters easier, she let him take her hand pressing it closely.

"Of course I trust you dear."

He lifted her hand romantically, setting his lips to each of her fingers in turn, and not caring who saw him. "My darling, and do remember that—whatever happens—you will always be my darling, think of us as travelling along a

road of life with milestones to be passed. We all arrive at certain destinations, those that fate has decreed for us. I think that you and I passed a big milestone on that long journey together when we drove up from Somersetshire the other week. I wish to Heaven that we had stayed in that lane as I wanted."

"Now don't begin that again, Ivan."

"I'm not beginning anything again, but I shall never cease to reproach myself for not persuading you." He hesitated a moment, then he said, "Do you remember Robert Louis Stevenson's words,

I will make you brooches
And toys for your delight.

That little lane was all brooches and toys for your delight, but we came out of it, and into the daylight and the hard high road. You found something. But I lost something, perhaps my dearest possession."

"Aren't you being rather silly, Ivan? We could not possibly have stayed there you know."

"Yes, we could have done. And if we had stayed the stars would never have set for us again."

"You're talking a lot of nonsense. We're going to be very happy together, Ivan, when the time comes, but the time isn't now. I have got to be free, and then we will have the loveliest wedding of all."

"That would have been the loveliest wedding of all," he said tenderly.

"We will go back there."

"I doubt that. People don't go back in life." Again he kissed her fingers and about the moment there was a sweet tenderness.

They sat on, and the wall which had been so relentless

seemed now to be only the thin ghost of a wall, a partition, no more. Ivan paid the bill and they walked home arm in arm, through the quiet streets with a little wind plucking at the plane trees. The thunder had passed and the threatened return of the heat had gone, the little wind had driven it away. It was cooler and much more comfortable. They walked as lovers walk, and Ivan talked banteringly and lightly of this and that. But Valère knew somehow that his ardour had cooled, and although he was making a valiant effort, something had changed him, he was not the same man who had driven home with her that night.

"You're coming in?" she asked.

"Only for a moment."

They went upstairs; the room always looked so pretty at this time of the evening, with the shadows, and the yellow street light, and the stars overhead. There were bowls of flowers in it, Valère was extravagant with flowers, and only to-day a client had brought her up a great garden bunch. The essence of syringa and dark red roses eddied together in the unforgettable scent of summer.

"It smells good," he said.

"Yes."

"Don't light the lights, darling. Let's be here in the dusk. The dusk is always kind."

She went across to him as he stood framed in the window. "Ivan why don't you tell me the truth? Something is making you miserable, what is it, my sweet? Nothing is to be gained by keeping it from me."

"It isn't my personal secret. Perhaps to-night I am miserable because I hated seeing my grandfather as he was. Perhaps I had a bad time with Sylvia, perhaps——" and then abruptly, "Oh, I don't know."

She mustn't force him.

"I'll trust you, Ivan."

"That's a darling."

They stood in the starlight with the little patisserie beneath them its shutters closed for the night. The vine was shedding stray leaves into the street below, for the drought had tried it, and the leaves had a touch of tarnish at the rim for lack of water.

It was like autumn.

Ivan said little, but he held her closely to him and she could hear his heart racing; his cheek was pressed against hers, but he didn't kiss her any more. It almost frightened her that he didn't kiss her.

"Well, I must be going. I'll call for you to-morrow night for the ball. Eight o'clock."

"Yes Ivan."

"What are you going as?"

"A secret. What are you going as?"

"A secret too. Well, I could do with some rest. Good night Valère, and may God bless you."

"Good night Ivan."

Last thing of all, from the door on to the rickety little landing, he half turned.

"Oh, I forgot. Sylvia asked me to give you this; she said that I was to tell you not to read it until you got to the ball to-morrow night. I meant to bring it along then, but I shall probably lose it. I expect it is some contribution to the charity funds that she wants you to give for her. She is surprisingly generous over charities, it would be just like her."

"She's sweet!"

"But you must promise not to open it, she said."

"Of course, not until I get to the ball."

He stood in the doorway; for a moment he hesitated then came back, striding masterfully across the room, putting his arms round her, and drawing her face up to his. For one

long moment everything seemed to pass. It was the old Ivan who kissed her, the demanding, insistent Ivan.

Then he released her without a word.

She stood in the room trembling, with the note in her hand, watching his shadow up the street, and knowing that he had not looked back once. Always before when he had left her, he had waved goodbye before he turned the final corner, but now something was missing. He had not looked back.

Something IS wrong, she thought.

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Valère did not sleep well that night; something was the matter and she knew it. Now she blamed herself for not having it out with Ivan, it would have been far wiser to attempt to break down the barrier and to force his hand so that he told her something about it.

She did not believe that the trouble lay entirely with his grandfather's illness; and it occurred to her that perhaps he had seen his mother.

The thought of that gipsy in her tattered shawl of rusty red, was menacing. In her own extraordinary way she still loved her gentleman son and would fight for him. She wanted him to marry Sylvia and she might quite easily have come to him and told him so. But then surely Ivan would have told Valère? She turned the situation over in her mind.

She could arrive at no conclusion.

She got up with a headache, one of those days with the heat rising again. The little wind had died at dawn, and now a hot thundery day was looming up. The smell of hot bread from the patisserie was not pleasant any more; she drank her coffee, and went off to the salon, walking through streets that gave the strange feeling of being unaired.

The salon was open to the day. She went into it and saw Mitzi sitting at the bureau. Only then did she remember the Mitzi she had seen last night, sitting on that seat in the park, with the rather shabby man beside her. But that Mitzi had had about her a general air of pleasantness. She had looked radiant in some fanciful way that Valère couldn't quite fathom.

"Hello?" she said.

Mitzi was sitting there biting the end of her enormous feather pen and smiling into space. She did not see Valère it seemed. It was so extraordinary for Mitzi to be smiling at this hour of the morning, when usually things got her down, that Valère stopped dead.

"What's the matter with you?"

"With me? Noz'zing."

"You seem very gay."

Mitzi threw down the gaily coloured pen; it spun across the room colliding with a ridiculous waste paper basket which Mr. Mollinson had brought back in triumph from Paris on his last trip; the waste paper basket had on it a gaudy picture of the Empress Josephine not looking her best but he had been very charmed with it.

"I am gay," said Mitzi.

"Well, what's happened?"

"I tell you. I tell you and Mr. Mollinson, and nobody else. I am to be married."

This was such a startling statement that for a moment it could only occur to Valère that Mitzi was pulling her leg. "You're going to be married?" she gasped.

"*Mais certainement.*"

"I didn't know there was anybody."

"And 'vy not?"

"Well, I just didn't think about it."

There had been so many rumours about Mitzi's past life,

none of which could be verified, and chatter had been enormous. Valère thought of the son she was supposed to have lost in the first world war, of the husband somebody said was a little corporal, and somebody else an important general, but shot for betraying his men.

Mitzi was one of those funny little women who lend themselves to stories.

"He is so wonderful," said Mitzi. "Last night 've sat in the park, and the park was Heaven and he was a prince, and I was *enchantement*."

Valère remembered the very shabby man who could never have been a prince even in the deepest disguise. "Well, I do congratulate you," she said.

That was when Mr. Mollinson bounced in. He had under his arm an enormous dress box, tied with tinsel ribbons in a fascinating way. He tapped it with a crooked finger. "This is for you," he said to Valère, "this is for to-night. I have had to go the whole way to fetch it, because that poppycock of a fellow rang me up and said that he wouldn't deliver it. I fetched it all myself. Few employers would do so much and go so far for an employee."

"It's very good of you."

But suddenly she knew that she did not want to go to the ball; her head ached; she felt rather sick, she hoped that she wasn't going to be ill. Mitzi saw it at once.

"Alkar-selzer," said Mitzi, "it is vonderful, it always makes me better."

She habitually kept a bottle in her drawer and now she fished for it, rooting amongst the papers there indiscriminately.

"That's good of you."

It must have occurred to Mr. Mollinson that there was something queer about Mitzi; he paused just as he was breaking the tinsel strings in his hands. He said "Now what's up with you?"

With a superb gesture Mitzi turned to him. "I am so *enchanted*," she said, "I am to be married."

"You married? What bosh!"

Mitzi's sallow old cheeks dyed a shade of magenta that was not wholly becoming. "And for 'vy not?" she demanded, her little french heels starting to click ominously; she always clicked them when she was getting into a temper.

"What, at your age?" said the indiscreet Mr. Mollinson.

Valère wanted to scream to him to stop; he was tempting providence and he would find that the place would collapse round him. Mitzi seized the ink pot, a large ormolu one bought to be impressive at a sale; it came across the room with everything in it, and in a single instant everything seemed to be spattered with ink, including the ostentatious beige suit that Mr. Mollinson wore. It was a dreadful little suit and now it looked ludicrous.

She burst into tears.

"I 'ate you, I 'ave always 'ated you and your so-zilly ways," screamed Mitzi, "I do not care, I do not care what 'appens to you and your reedeculous dresses. I go."

She tottered across the room on her absurd little heels, leaving him where he was.

"Damn the woman, look what she's done to me. Damn the woman," wailed Mr. Mollinson.

That was a dreadful morning with Valère, the only sane person left in the establishment to deal with the clients who came in, for Mr. Mollinson had dispatched himself homewards in the first taxi he could get to find another suit, and even then nothing could smooth his ruffled dignity.

It was a wearing day with another thunder storm, and difficult clients grown irritable by reason of the weather, and with much to do. She got away late, with the dress box under her arm, and she thought that she would have collapsed by the roadside on the way back.

But when she had had a bath and a cup of tea she felt very much better; it was surprising that the harrowing day had done no more for her. She opened the box and laid the exquisite Polish dress out on the bed.

The annoying thing was that Mr. Mollinson had been quite right. It would have been banal to go as an ordinary Polish peasant, but this bridal frock was very beautiful. The gold tissue caught the light, the roses were exquisitely embroidered if not entirely true to the country; the flower crown was enchantingly made and she knew that it would suit.

She took her time over her bath, knowing that it would revive her more than anything else, and she drew on clean under-clothing, of sheer silk, caressing to the flesh. Very slowly she dressed, and she knew now that this was her night. To-night everything would right itself. The frock was a radiant memory of old times, the joy of those happier days that could never return lay in the tissue as she clasped it about her waist. She saw her reflection in the long mirror and knew that she looked beautiful. She plaited her hair closely round her head and set the crown of flowers atop it. It was very beautiful indeed.

As yet it was early, in spite of the fact that she had not hurried herself, it was nothing like half past eight, and she sat down to wait in the window of the room. The heat had been stifling all day, with the thunder in the afternoon, but again the little wind that is born of night had come to tired London and was fanning it with some semblance of coolness. She started to put the little things that she would want for the evening into her handbag, girlish trifles that had to be thrust into the tiny pockets, for safe keeping. There, lying in the bag, was the letter that Sylvia had sent her by Ivan last night. She touched it enquiringly.

She had said that she would not open it until the ball

began, but for her the ball had practically started, sitting here and waiting for Ivan, and once he came there would be bustle and thrill and excitement and no chance to read the letter quietly. Whereas now it would be far more pleasant. She did not think that Sylvia who was the most understanding person would mind, and she tore it open.

It was a far longer letter than she had anticipated and as she started to read she could feel her eyes dilate.

Beaumont Street,
W.I.

Darling Valère,

I do not know what you will have to say to me, for in a sense I suppose that I have broken your confidence and may even have shattered your faith in me. Oh, I do so hope not. The other afternoon when you were here talking to me, I realised that you were about to take a terribly wrong step and for this step all our happiness might be broken. I knew that if Ivan once knew the truth, he would never have forgiven you, he is funny that way, because nothing in this world would have made him betray Leo.

I knew that Leo loved you, because he had told Ivan so, although of course Ivan never knew that you were you, and in another way altogether I knew that you loved him, because you gave it away in everything that you said and did, even though it was not the same type of emotion that you are feeling for Ivan.

I did not know what to do, and perhaps because I was so anxious for us all, and perhaps because I am foolish, I have told Ivan the truth.

He knew that it was Leo last night, and the moment that he knew he said that he would never accept such a sacrifice on Leo's part. Oh Valère, you will think that I have been cruel, but I felt that somebody had to think for you and do

something to help us all out of this mess. Leo will have free choice. He is one of those men who will do anything for his friends, he will as you know make any sacrifice, whereas Ivan is not made the same way. Any sacrifice that he may be called upon to make will be a smaller one, but he is quite adamant about it.

I suppose that I have always loved Ivan, I always shall, and sometimes I think that I understand him more than most people, even he admits that part of it. Perhaps I understand you a little too, but I knew that you were very worried about your future. If you had not been, perhaps that green lane would have been more than a blind alley in your lives. This I do believe.

For that reason alone, dear dear Valère and please believe me when I say that you will always be my dear, dear Valère, I did what I have done, and oh, I pray that you will be eternally happy.

Please come to see me when you can.

Sylvia.

As the letter slipped from between Valère's fingers she heard the sound of somebody knocking at the door.

"Come in?" she said.

This was the moment to challenge Ivan and she knew it. She saw the door open and the man standing in the doorway. He was dressed as a Viennese of the times when Johann Strauss wrote his Tales of the Vienna Woods, so full of love, and life and rapture. He stood there looking at her, the cream of his uniform braided with blue and silver shone in the light. But the man who stood there was not Ivan, it was Leo.

She rose, her throat going dry.

He said. "Valère, this was not entirely my own idea and you must forgive me if I intrude, but I had to come."

Everything she had wanted to say died suddenly. "Yes, Leo," was the only answer she made.

He shut the door behind him, and crossing the room came to stand before her, looking into her eyes. "Shall I tell you that I don't think you loved your Ivan enough?" he asked, "I believe quite sincerely that you love your husband a great deal more. After all he is your husband, or isn't he?"

He had hold of her wrist. About him there was something compelling. "Leo, what can I say?"

"Only that to-night is our honeymoon night? Our real honeymoon night. Would that surprise you?"

She had never thought that for him her heart could miss a beat, but it did. She could not stop herself raising her arms and clasping them about his neck. Suddenly she did not care. She saw for a single moment Ivan's car disappearing Somersetwards with Sylvia beside him, and the gipsy with her crystal who had seen it all, and who had wanted her gentleman son to stay a gentleman. But now Valère was in Leo's arms. She was dressed as a Polish bride, and this was her honeymoon night. She understood much to which until this moment she had been blind.

"You married me because you loved me, Leo?"

"Well, of course. What did you think? Why hadn't I married every other girl threatened by the Nazis? Only that was hardly the moment for talking about it."

"Oh Leo, I've been so blind."

"I meant you to be in the beginning, because I thought that was best for you; later I intended tearing the bandage aside, but Sylvia did it for me. She must be a very wonderful person."

"She is," and Valère sounded to be quite choky, "she's marvellous."

He kissed her on the mouth. "Come Valère, or like Cinderella, we shall be late for the ball."

She slipped her hand on his uninjured arm, and they went out together in the dress of make-believe, and she knew that they would make the world their own.

It had all passed, that green lane and the camp fire, the gipsy and her crystal, and the Hall. Nothing mattered save that she was married to the finest man in the world, and it was her honeymoon night.

She was a bride.

